Riptide

A Childe Zine

PAGE ARTISTS

Cerise_Royale

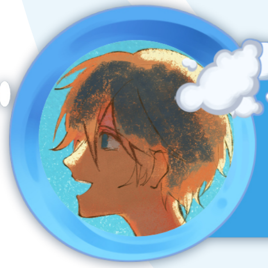
Haru

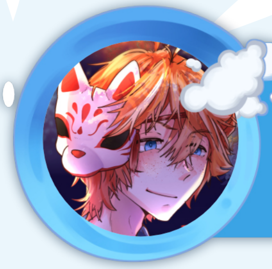
Akaigu

TheArtArmature

Ramune

Artistotel


Rei


Ash

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Riku

Lywn

PAGE ARTISTS

Nixerces

Nyicti

Sleepyzen

Rose_Teapot

Bang

MERCH ARTISTS

Aleks

Chan

Sol

WRITERS

DISTANT SHORELINES
Bumbles

A SILENT HUG MEANS A THOUSAND WORDS
RainyByDay

NOT AS I DO
2D Trash

GLITTER LOOKS GOOD ON YOU
Nomad Dash

OF FAMILY & FOOD
Flynn

MY HOME IS YOURS
Yael

THE DEEP AND DARK EMBITTERED
Cavalierious

COMRADES IN ARMS
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Riptide is a fanmade zine created with the communal effort of a series of amazing contributors in tribute of *Genshin Impact's* character Childe. We would like to thank everyone from contributors, supporters, and moderators for their hard work in bringing this idea to reality.

Please enjoy your journey through our zine,
and ride out the riptide!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cerise_Royale .... Cover Front, Cover Back, 8, 9
Sleepyzen 10
RainyByDay 12
Rose_Teapot 22
Ash 24, 113
Nomad Dash 26
Peu 34
Yael 38
Lywn 55
Rei 56
TheArtArmature 58, 120
Eni 59
Haru 70
Ramune 72
Akaigu 73
Flynn 74
Nyicti 84, 86
Riku 88
Nixerces 89
Bumbles 90
Bang 97
Artistotel 98, 99
ErgoGida 100
2D Trash 102
Cavalierious 120
Aleks 130, 131, 132
Sol 131
Chan 133
Merch Download Link 133

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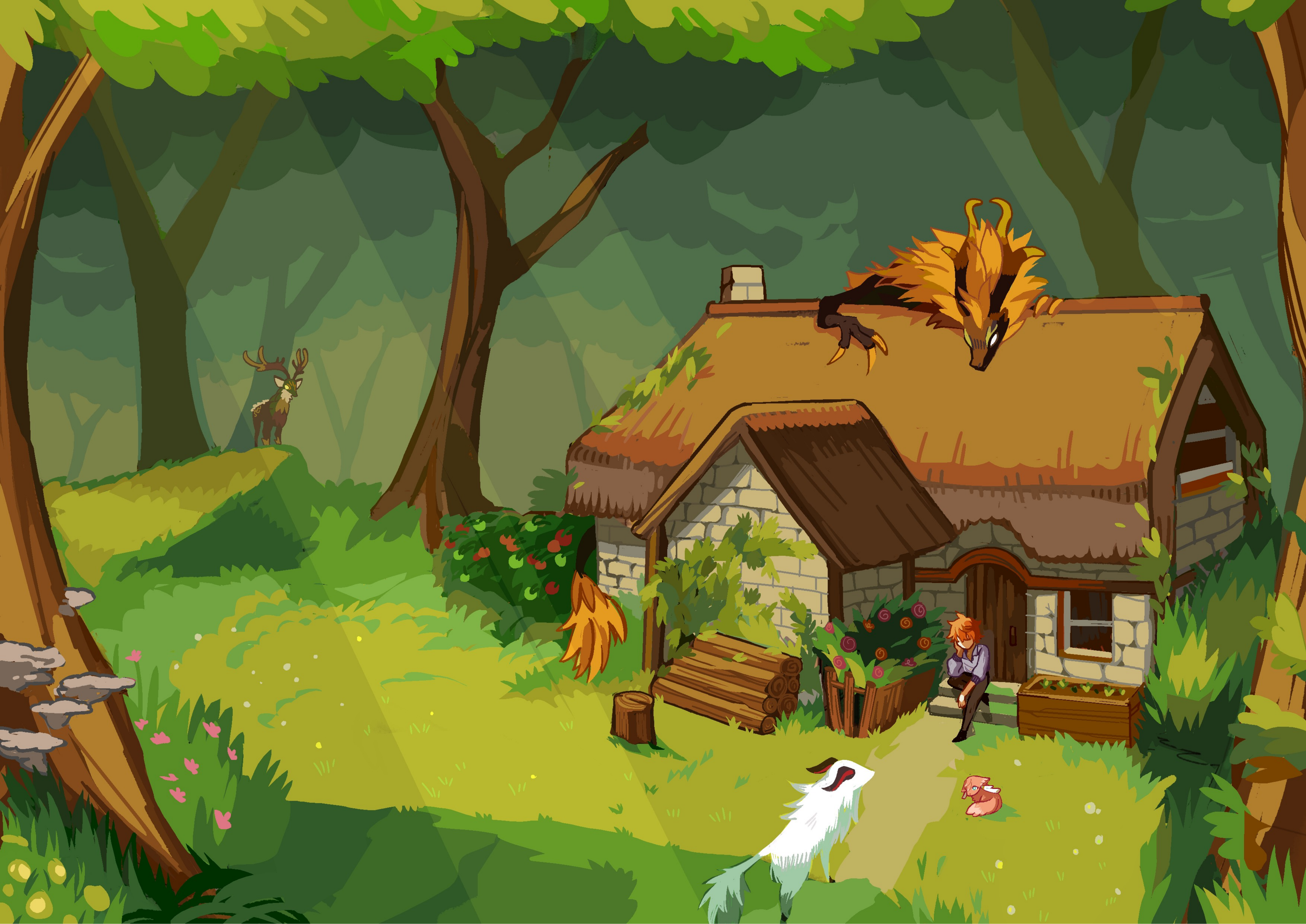


A Silent Hug Means A Thousand Words

People always wear a mask, it's scarce for a stranger on the streets to unshed their true nature compared to the polite smiles and clear fronts they give off.

Childe was the same.

Childe is the playful and charming front of a promising young man who would ease your worries. A diplomat of Snezhnaya who would work alongside his coworkers at the Northland Bank. An entertainer of the children, a friend of the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor, and a regular shopper in the stress of Liyue.

Tartaglia is a battle craving monster crawling out of the Abyss wearing blood akin to a second skin with dying stars in his eyes. The feral monster in a child's body who will kill and defeat those in battle as he so pleases. The Eleventh Fatui Harbinger sheds his blade for an Archon of Cryo.

Two frequent masks, two sides of a coin that can be flipped as easily as breathing. To most people, these are the faces of Childe and the Eleventh Harbinger: a battle-crazed maniac and a bountiful young man.

A bright sun and a daunting moon.

But for all their light, both cast a shadow.

A shadow of a boy named Ajax.

In most scenarios, Childe would be the one to appease others in social situations with Tartaligla coming out in the face of battle. Rarely has Ajax ever come out to anyone who wasn't family and even rarer for Childe, much less Tartaglia, to ever be placed in a situation where they are forced to push Ajax back from resurfacing.

But Liyue had started to test the will they had for the boy who loved adventures with a love for his family rivaling his own thirst for battle.

Liyue was supposed to be another region to be stationed at, an opening for him to potentially find and fight the Geo Archon in all his glory and take his Gnosis. It was just a mission for him to complete and nothing more in the name of the Tsaritsa.

But sometimes life likes to rear its head and prove him wrong.

Ajax started to stir at the rumble of a deep baritone voice that shared the secrets and history of Liyue's rich and prospering lands. He peeked out once he heard a contagious laugh and saw a fanged smile with butterfly eyes. The boy stared but was too tired to come out, deciding that, while he loved the voices of those that his protectors seemed to gather he still felt cold. So he did nothing but slumber, only opening his eyes by a silver when his protectors felt even the littlest of warmth.

Then more voices, more new faces, and smiles of children coming to greet him. The roar of electric strings, the delightful smell of a warm cooked meal, the awe of a practiced dance, and the fumbling of a cold presence.

All new connections yet none of them knew that they were not close enough, not familiar enough, nor important for Childe to falter or Tartaglia to tense at. They were not significant to motivate Ajax away from his warm cocoon of safety and dreams.

Such is the life of a child being protected from the dangers of the outside.

(But he wasn't a child anymore, no matter how much he wished he was.)

Then another voice mixed in with the rest. But unlike the rest, there was a shift in clarity with his arrival.

Childe was the first to see it, the defensiveness that amused him as the young master protectively stood by the young exorcist. He didn't glare, not in the way that it was apparent. Instead, he made it his mission to be as difficult as possible. When they eat, he would quickly snatch the next bite of food he was eyeing. When it rains, he would share his umbrellas with the others but not him as he would say he didn't have enough for everyone. And when it comes to idle chatter, he would always purposefully direct attention away from Childe as much as possible.

Childe, seeing all of this, was beyond amused. The young master of the Feiyun Commerce Guild seems to hold some sort of disdain against him, one that wasn't personal nor was it deep enough to be at the level of hate.

Perhaps he ran into some trouble with the Fatui? While he has been stationed in Liyue the recent year, there were groups of Fatui soldiers scattered throughout the land before his arrival. It could be that one of those groups brought out the disdain that the young master has for him for being a Fatui soldier as well. He would need to recheck those reports that were given to him when he first arrived in Liyue.

If, however, it turns out to be one of his men, then he wouldn't mind doing a surprise evaluation for those he stationed during his stay. It wouldn't be good if his men started to slip under his command after all.

No one likes a foolish commander.

But that doesn't mean that the young master will stop his pettiness. Childe did nothing, knowing it was for the best.

That was until the younger ones wanted to spar with one another.

Tartaglia watched with eager eyes as bursts of pyro and uneven shards of geo decorated the sparing area. The sun was beaming down at him with an uncomfortable heat but he did not let him falter from watching the fighting styles of visions holders before him. Natural vision holders are hard to come by and even rare for them to fight for him to observe.

Today was a good day.

It became even better when he saw the young master walking towards him with the purposeful eager eyes of a hard made warrior.

Childe was hesitant when the young master proposed for a spar of hydro users, but Tartaglia pushed him aside at the offered treat. He was quick to agree and patently allowed the young master to recite the rules that they would follow.

No serious injuries, no outside help, and the first of three wins.

And with that, all said in done, Tartaglia entered the mindset for battle.

Sparring with the young master was fun. From the few hydro users he has seen, most seem to focus on support and healing rather than raising a weapon to fight. Yet the young master, much to his delight, pointed his swords towards him. He laughed when the younger one summoned an array of hydro swords dancing by him, confidence upholding his stance.

Waves of hydro and hydro projections clashed with one another as blades met blades. Swift acrobatic movements matching that of sharp turns and powerful slashes. For every jab was met with a flip and every drop pick was met with the point of a water sword. It was exhilarating to face an appointee who wasn't afraid to fight him not out of fear or desperation but of an act of righteousness that blends well with pride. There was no bloodlust or aggression between their blows, only eager movements to top the other into submission.

Perhaps it's because of this that Childe started to seep through, small observations made in between rounds and light compliments here and there. To the young master's credit, he didn't take his comments to face value and actually adjusted his fighting style as Childe suggested. He eased his grip, became aware of his ankles as he makes his landings, and tested the amount of projections he used during their spar. As much as he seems to be tense around Childe, he wasn't that far aware from understanding that Childe was sincere in his ideal chatter.

Even more so was that it wasn't uncommon for Tartaglia to have fun as soon as a weapon was in his hands. Laughter and a feral-like smile would cross his face in the heat of battle. Sometimes even thoughtless comments would escape his lips in his mist of happiness to his enjoyment in the face of violence.

What he didn't expect was for the young master to *snark back at him*. Narrow forced eyes start to slit with a matching smile that screams mischievous. A fire would light in his eyes as he quote back lines from plays and books (like Childe didn't notices where they are referenced from) to insult him for his eagerness in battle. Childe, delighted by this, would quote back his own underhand comments which almost made the young master slip before he upright himself quick enough to dodge his attacks.

It was right near the beginning of their last round did Childe and Tartaglia notices the differences in the young master.

His eyes were sparkling, a playful smile that was paired with him bouncing on his toes as if he had too much energy to get rid of.

It was then did both Childe and Tartaglia realized that the young master wasn't acting cautions like the exchange of a business deal but was beaming with the energy of that of an excited child.

And that was what made Ajax stir.

What once was a faceless voice became the glow of golden-amber eyes. Dark navy blue hair akin to that of the ocean waved alongside the wind. White ruffled sleeves surrounding soft pale hands holding a sword made of far too heavy metal for his body to handle weighted him down. Pale skin that worried him as the young one is a local to the hot Liyue sun. A small thin frame similar to that of Tonia's was just the right size to hold into a tight and never let go.

For a second, Ajax looked up to this boy he never met before and **wanted**.

But the Childe quickly pushed him back as Tartaglia started their last spare with a hydro arrow.

That night in bed, the ginger-haired man could only stare into the darkness as he thinks about snow covered windows and tiny hands that held his own. Sweet words of welcome and uncovered hands ruffling through unruly hair as a sign of affection. A table with no empty seats with plates half full felt like a feast under the domestic scene of his family sharing stories around the room. A light scene of a family that was once full and bright.

Ajax can only close his eyes as he remembered the darkness soon after, escaping into a scene of survival to rid of his thoughts of dark navy hair.

Yet it wasn't easy, not when the wavering thought of family keeps coming to mind when he sees his fellow hydro vision holder.

The pettiness was still there, the need to slightly underhand him with insults in flowery words. Yet so was the softness of round eyes rather than narrow ones. A spark of a mischievous boyish grin seems to replace his neutral frown. His hands no longer tense at the sight of him and instead relax with an open book. Idle chatter soon became short conversations which turned into a silent challenge of words before open snarky remarks are made. Open sessions to spar became a weekly practice and quick trips to the bookstore became a stable.

Slowly the young master became a comrade.

And the act of trying to restrain himself became harder by the day.

Childe slips sometimes, where a polite distance between the two would be closed in a second when Ajax noticed a dim in his comrade's eyes. Tartaglia had to force himself to keep on a steady pace of attacks when Ajax notices the helpless frustration in the young one's eyes during their spars. Even more so when they both had to tense at the insistence of their first identity whenever they catch even a glimpse of dark navy hair.

This comes to a puzzling thought.

Why did Ajax see his comrade as someone to be coddled and protected? Perhaps not to the extent of his younger siblings but felt enough familiar domestic sense that pulls him towards the younger boy's side. It's strange to be reminded of family through golden eyes that were nowhere similar to bright sky blue ones.

So why, out of every child he came across through his journey as a Fatui soldier, did this boy tug at the big brother inside of him?

The need to ruffle ocean locks of hair, to spoil the boy with piles of well versed literature, and the unadulterated affection that grows. All for one boy.

Did he remind him of his younger siblings with his love for pranks? Or was it because of how solemn he becomes in the presence of unfamiliar adults? Is it the connection of their ever changing ambition that drew him in? Or is it because he sees a far too mature child?

(Or maybe it's been so long since he played ‘family’ that he craved a sense of ‘home’.)

(But then… why him? Why this boy?)

(Why now?)

Ajax doesn't know why he felt familiar affection for Xingqiu and that is what scares Childe and Tartaglia the most.

They could have hidden away and avoided the boy but it was impossible when the young boy seems to be **attached** to them as well. Where it was Childe that would seek out the young master it was now Xingqiu that would come to the Harbinger disguised Diplomat. Whether it was for another spar, a recommended book at hand, or simply to stir a bit of mischief, Xingqiu would walk right up to him without fear.

In a year's time, what once was an orchestrated mission to steal the Gnosis became a personal affair of his own attachment to Liyue. Let it be that of the land or its people he had in the end started to see Liyue as a second home.

And wasn't that a funny thought?

Maybe the funny bit was how laughably easy it was to be physically affectionate to Xingqiu.

If a worried look were to ever cross Xingqiu's face, Ajax would consulate him with brotherly words and a hand rest on his shoulder.

If they were to browse the merchants' stocks for the day then Ajax would find himself plopping his head over a bed of dark navy locks to look what captured the boy's attention. If Xingqiu was to get too snarky then he would flick his finger towards his forehead as a sign to behave like that of an unruly child.

But perhaps what solidified the anxious thoughts of affection only came after a spar.

As a warrior and soldier, Ajax knows the effect of adrenaline and what it does in the balance of survival. The Abyss taught him about death while Skirk taught him how to live. He knows what it feels like to have his body move without his control in the midst of battle.

He just didn't think that while deflecting a sword projectile from his left that the look of competitiveness, the focused look of a boy needing to win on Xingqiu was what broke the dam.

Where a confident look of chivalry and pride emitted from his poster was swapped with a ferocious readiness of a boy who wants to **win**.

And in the reflection of those eyes, all he could think was if this is what his Master felt when he spared with her in the Abyss.

Pride.

As the spar ended and Xingqiu yielded under his blade, a mental battle of personalities and personas started to enact in his mind. A blank look on his face as he stared at the boy much to Xingqiu's confusion.

Before his mind caught up, his hand was already ruffling through navy locks as his other arm wrapped around Xingqiu into a side hug.

Then he froze.

A silence settled between the two.

Before Ajax can retreat his both hands away another pair of hands held onto the arm that was wrapped around him.

Ajax stared.

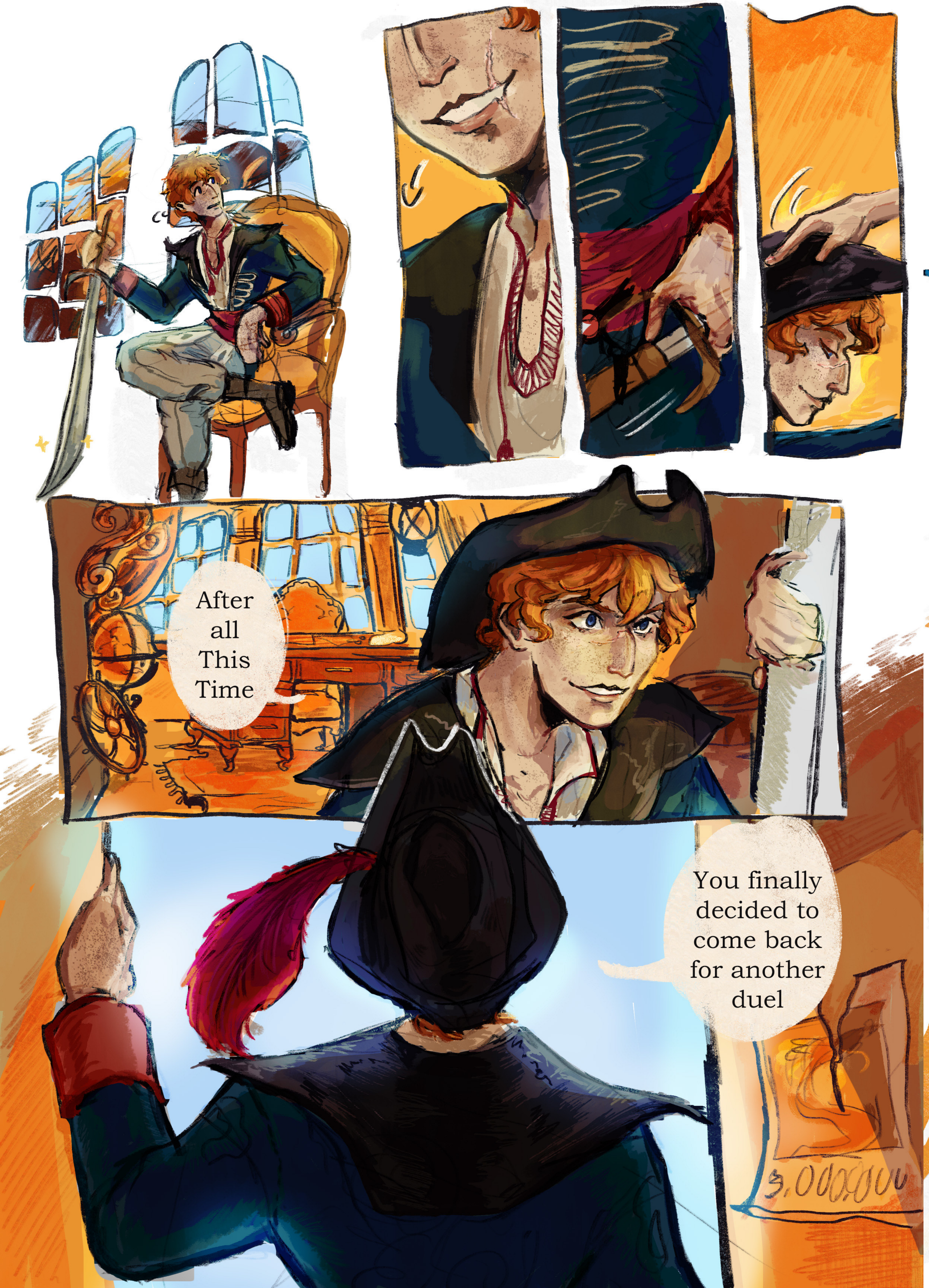
Xingqiu didn't move nor did he let go.

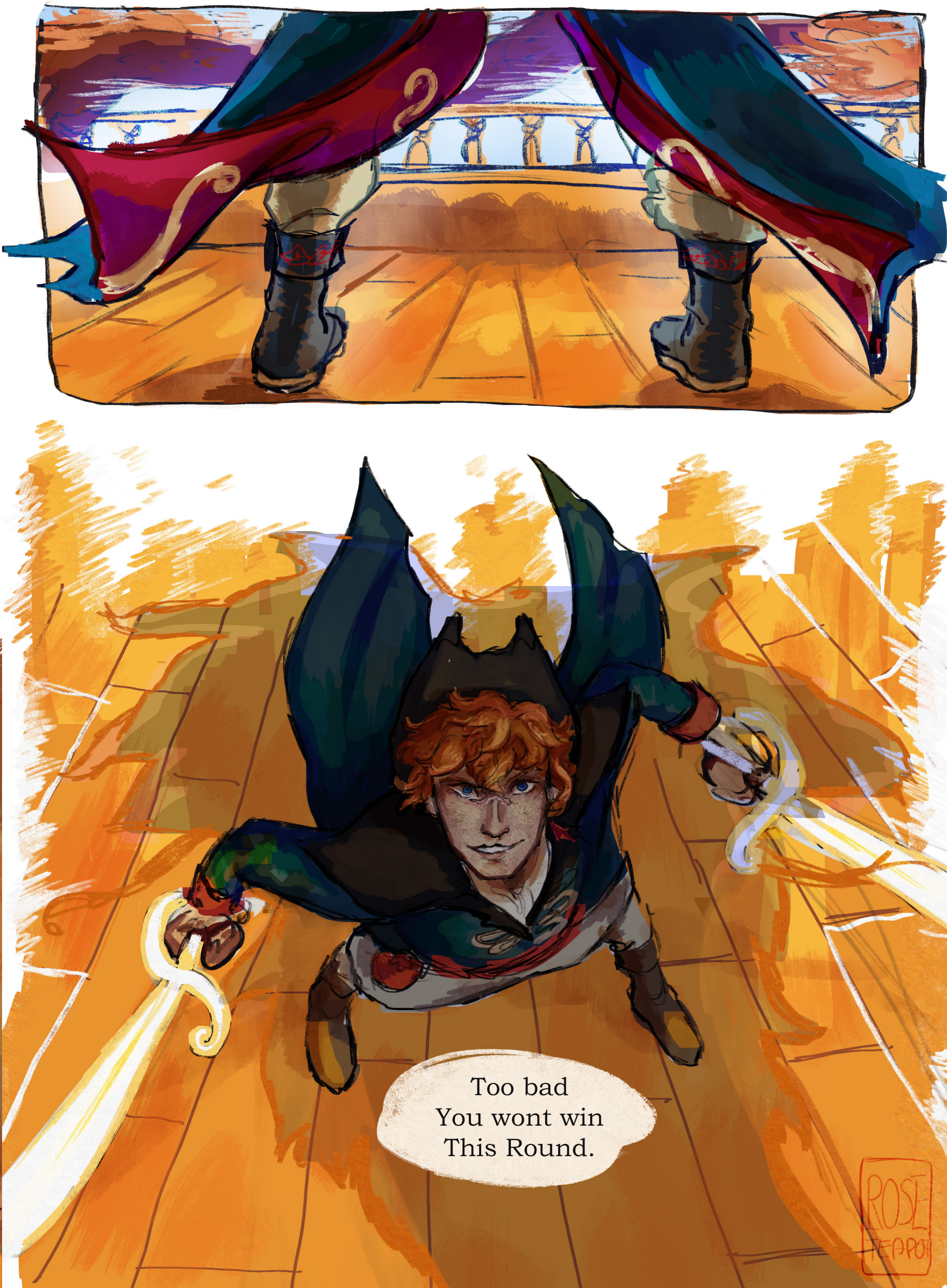
A second later, a cautious movement of fingers in silky locks ruffled them once again in a slow rhythm.

The moment dragged on, neither of the boys moving from their spots even as sweat cling to their skin, weapons unceremonial dropped without care, or for the long stretch of time that extended between them.

Only Ajax slowly ruffled Xingqiu's hair in his half given hug.

Just an older brother softly congratulating his younger brother.


After all This Time
You finally decided to come back for another duel
3.000,000


Too bad You wont win This Round.
ROSE TEAPOT

Glitter Looks Good On You

Something, something… curiosity killed the cat and all that shit. Why care about such sayings when he could learn instead? Ajax always was the hands on type of learner, after all, so much so that his curiosity was called childlike both as a compliment and an insult. He did hear it more often as an insult though, but maybe that's just because of who his boyfriend was as a person.

Cute, little, Kunikuzushi, or Kuni-chuu, Ajax liked to call him much to his dismay. If Kuni hated the nickname so much, maybe he shouldn't have agreed to date him; especially since he knew that Ajax went out of his way to say it just to make him more mad. He was cuter when he was angry, but Ajax finding out what buttons he could push and boundaries he could toe was not the lesson for the day.

Today… Ajax was spending the night at Kuni's place for the first time. Nothing sexual—they weren't at that point yet—but just… being with each other. For a full night and day. Potentially sleeping next to each other in the same bed if Ajax didn't do something that kicked him to the couch. Awesome. Ajax almost felt like a kid when he was packing himself a bag of clothes and necessities to bring with him. He thought after he was done, he would say his goodbyes to all his siblings and tell his mom when he would be back home tomorrow, but he was a grown man who hadn't lived at home for a few years now.

His excitement sure didn't help that feeling, but Ajax was able to keep that to himself. Small bag over his shoulder and keys in hand, Ajax left his condo to head to his car. His only regret was that it was late at night so the most they could do was maybe watch some television and go to sleep. The real fun date stuff was tomorrow and maybe… if things went *really well*… he could spend a second night over. Maybe he should go pack another set of clothes…

Ajax tossed that thought aside as he drove out of the parking lot. There was no need to get ahead of himself like that. This was just a sleepover more than anything. With that thought in mind, it wasn't all that surprising when Kuni welcomed him into his apartment in loungewear. It was weird seeing him look so… toned down.

“Stop gawking at me,” Kuni finally snapped at him when the chill, late night dinner and movie fun was done with and it was time to sleep.

“I can't help it,” Ajax whined, a little more dramatic than natural for extra fun, “you look cute.” All the black, shredded clothes and silver chains and spikes were replaced with a faded college t-shirt and sweatpants. Ajax didn't know what he expected Kuni to sleep in, but it sure wasn't something so domestic looking.

Kuni groaned at him like he ate something disgusting, but at least he didn't tell him off. They climbed into bed together, and after a lot of maneuvering and convincing on Ajax's end, they settled into the basic idea of a cuddle. It sounded nice, but it was really just them laying really close to each other because Kuni did not want his arms around him. Ajax accepted that and happily fell asleep some time later.

Only for him to wake up the next morning holding onto Kuni with his arms and legs around him like a human body pillow. Oops. It was an accident, but staying that way until Kuni started to wake up himself was intentional.

There was no time for yelling at him for clinging like a parasite as it was time to get ready for the day, date included. It didn't take long for Ajax to get ready, but then again he didn't have an extensive skincare and makeup routine like Kuni did. It was an exciting day, so of course Ajax couldn't keep to himself and he had to sit in the bathroom watching Kuni's extensive process.

And of course, he couldn't stay silent for long either and had to talk about something.

"Tonia used to want to be a makeup artist." Ajax remembered how she would tell him about all these new brands and palettes she was *totally saving up for and not-so-subtly hinting at Ajax to buy for her.* His job did pay very well, and he didn't know what to do with the money half the time after his own needs were filled, so he didn't really mind at all. He chuckled at the memory. "She used to practice on me a lot." And he sure… looked a way most of the time.

Kuni didn't look at him even in the mirror's reflection, too busy making sure the red eyeshadow was vibrant and sharp. "Why you?" He even sounded uninterested.

"Big brother privilege." Ajax said with pride. He did go out of his way to make sure he was readily available to help his siblings all the time, all the way from tough school work to letting them use him as a canvas.

Kuni only hummed, leaning towards the mirror to fix something Ajax couldn't really see. Ajax wasn't looking at his eyes anymore, not when he found it fascinating that he somehow didn't have his mouth open while doing whatever it was he needed to touch up. Tonia told him that *everyone* unintentionally left their mouth open as they did eye makeup.

Continuing the conversation, Ajax looked away and smiled down at his lap. "I don't know why she *kept* asking me to do it though. I couldn't sit still for the life of me." Lipstick was fine, foundation felt a little weird—it sure didn't help she caked on more than was probably needed. Blush, contour and highlighter was a bit ticklish, but nothing made him flinch more than the products that would come close to his eyes.

Ajax expected another uninterested hum, but it didn't come. Kuni took the short step from the bathroom counter to the toilet, standing right between Ajax's legs. He wasn't given the chance to look up on his own as Kuni took his chin between his thumb and index finger, tilting his head upwards. Ajax would've thought it was sweet like he suddenly wanted a kiss, but he was smitten for only a second when he saw Kuni come at his face with black pencil and a sinister look.

Just as he said he used to, Ajax squirmed away from his hold and the eyeliner. Kuni's laugh drowned out the *clink* of him accidentally moving the toilet tank lid a bit in his attempt to get away.

"Aw, scared of a little eyeliner? How pathetic," Kuni teased him, pointing at him with the makeup.

"I wasn't expecting you to do that," Ajax sputtered out a weak defense, using all his will power to stop his embarrassed blush from staining his cheeks.

"Well, start expecting it, then." The smug look on Kuni's only grew as he placed the eyeliner down and grabbed something else.

"Uh… what do you mean by that?"

"We're doing your makeup, too."

That sure didn't help his blush from disappearing, but it did bring forth a lot of questions. "Wait, but we're going on a date soon?" He was really looking forward to it, actually.

Kuni scoffed at him. "I'm not going to waste my expensive shit on you to make you look bad." Using one hand to get what he needed wasn't enough as he reached out to grab a palette to go with his brush. Ajax spared a brief look over to see what he was doing. It was a smaller brush, but he couldn't remember if that closed palette in his hand was eyeshadow, contour, or blush. Whatever it was, Kuni adjusted it to stay in his hand more comfortably as he adjusted his footing for Ajax's knees to be between his thighs. Ignoring his fidgeting, Kuni sat on his lap. "Don't you trust me?"

A one-two punch knockout. Kuni knew it with the way he looked at him with attempted puppy-eyes to get what he wanted as if Ajax needed more convincing. He didn't have to do all that, stating it like he did before was enough for Ajax to accept it as is. This was a nice bonus though, even if it did leave him flustered. "Y-Yeah, I do."

With a triumphant hum, Kuni popped open the palette to show off the shades of blacks, grays, and silvers. "Good, now shut up and close your eyes."

Ajax closed his eyes so tight his face scrunched up as well. He could hear Kuni sigh at him, but the first touch of product he felt on his face was actually the other end of the brush poking his cheek. "Relax," Kuni instructed, sounding more like a demand than a word of advice. Ajax still felt a little tense, but he did do as asked and relaxed his face with his eyes still closed.

Kuni didn't do anything for a moment, maybe to make sure Ajax had relaxed enough for his liking, but all it did was make him feel all the more tense. Finally, with a sigh from Kuni, Ajax could hear the soft sweep of the brush picking up product in the pan. The first touch of product against his eyelids felt… weird again. Was it cold? Wet? It was a feeling he couldn't really describe and he wanted to open his eyes and look, but he knew better not to do that.

What surprised Ajax the most was that it was applied a lot gentler than he anticipated. Tonia was heavy handed when he was her model and her constantly trying yet not really knowing how to blend eyeshadow would often leave his eyelids feeling sore, but this felt like an almost tickle without leaving him squirming anymore. Actually, he was quite proud of himself for how still he was.

More makeup was placed on his eyelids and it took a lot for Ajax to not get too impatient to see what was happening. From what he could tell from touch alone, Kuni was true to his word making him actually look good with how thorough he was being. Finally, he heard the eyeshadow palette click shut and found it safe to open his eyes. With no scolding coming, Ajax watched him put the palette to the side and look for something else.

The need to squirm came back as soon as he saw him pick up eyeliner. He needed a distraction.

"Are you going to do other things? Like lipstick and blush?" He knew those things, and knew that Kuni at least had a tube or two of lipstick in his stash.

He was met with an incredulous look. "Do you *want* lipstick and blush?"

It worked, and it almost all went according to plan if Ajax knew when to stop talking. "Yeah, we're going all out, aren't we? Might as well tie the look all together! Besides, we can match as you put it on and give me a big ol' kiss."

He was rewarded with the rounded end of the eyeliner shoved up his nose. "How fucking cringy can you be?"

After he was done assaulting his right nostril, Kuni didn't look for any lipstick to fulfill his request and kept the eyeliner in hand. Ajax felt like a prisoner that was about to be tortured for information. Here he was, stuck and mentally tied to the toilet with his cute boyfriend, a solid weight on his lap. Kuni was pointedly ignoring his growing discomfort and made sure he was securely in place with a hand grabbing his chin.

"Don't you dare move," Kuni instructed again and Ajax flinched his eyes closed. He could hear Kuni's eyes rolling to accommodate his scoff, but he didn't have any retort to that. If anything, he would just get the pencil shoved up his other nostril.

At the first touch of eyeliner against his top lid, he was already wiggling around. He couldn't help it, it was weird and even colder and he could feel it too close to the seam between his eyelids. Once again it felt like Kuni had a lighter hand than Tonia did, but that didn't mean much to him when there was a "sharp" liquid pencil right on top of his eyeball. Kuni didn't outright scold him from moving around, but that didn't stop him from occasionally grunting his annoyance that he couldn't get the line as straight as he wanted.

The tip wasn't flexible at all as it was dragged from the inner corner of his eye outwards over his orbital bone. Kuni went over the line again, maybe trying to fill it in or make it straighter, this finesse Ajax didn't really know the name of. It all just sucked ass.

Unfortunately, Ajax did have two eyes, so the torture was only halfway done. With a hand still under Ajax's chin, Kuni tilted his head to give himself better access to his other eye. Ajax still flinched at the touch, and Kuni only grunted at him again. At least that was better than nose assault.

The second eye took *too long*, but of course to Ajax, too long was more than a second. The same attempt at touch ups were applied to that eye too, but he was reaching his limit of how much of it he could handle.

Either Kuni realized this or he had impeccable timing as he finally stopped touching his eyelids. He tilted Ajax's head about, looking over his work. "It's not a bad look," he said to himself.

Ajax saw it as permission to open his eyes. It felt weird in a general not used to makeup way, but still better than what Tonia used to do to him. "What?"

He didn't realize how close Kuni had leaned in to work on his makeup until he moved back with a scowl ruined by a growing blush. "I don't use metallics," he muttered, almost struggling to maintain eye contact, "so I never touched them if my palettes have them."

"Oh," that made sense, he never saw him wear any shiny eyeshadow, "does it look good?"

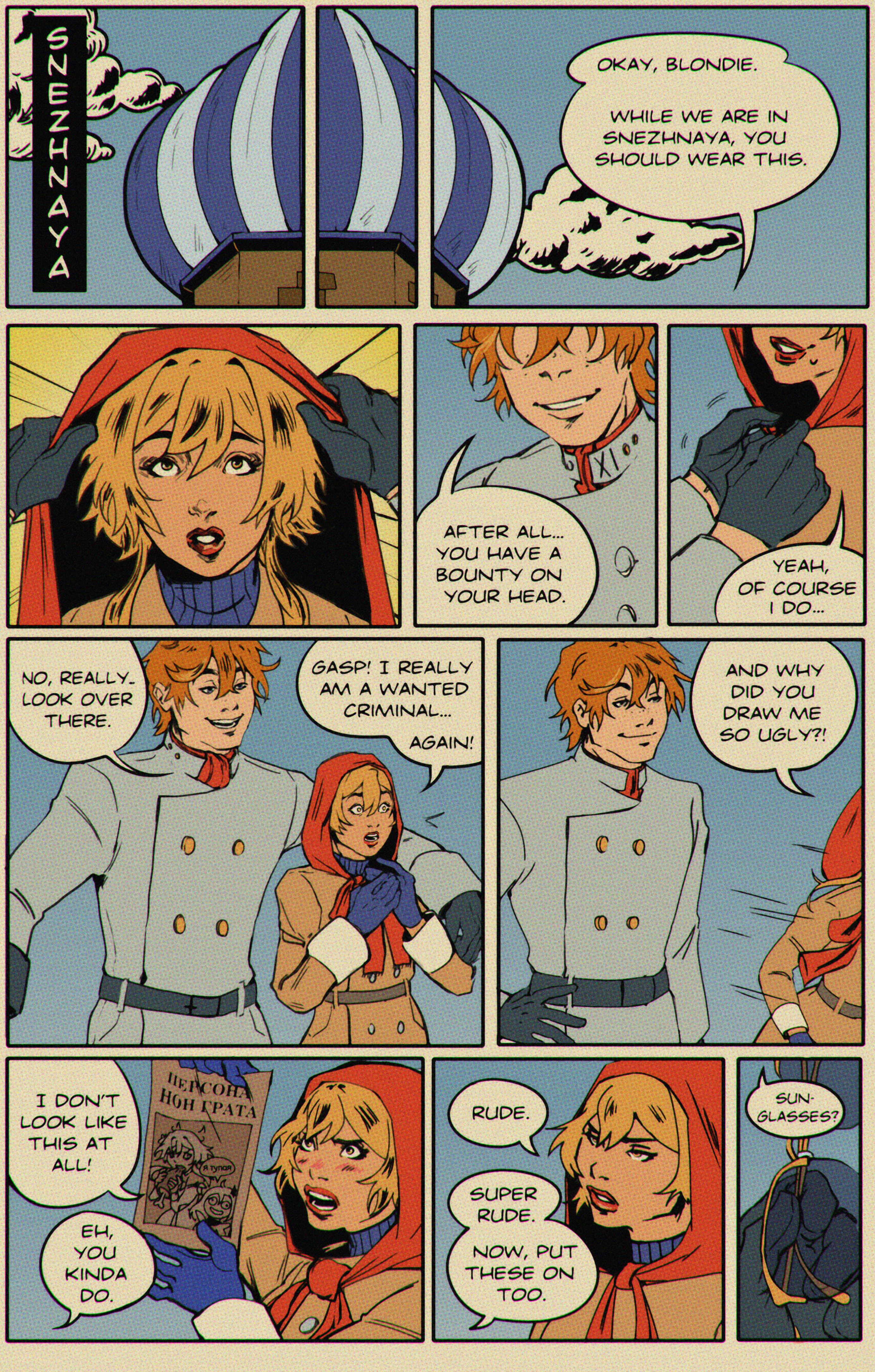
"See for yourself." Kuni had started to get out of his lap, but Ajax was quicker. He wrapped his arms around Kuni's waist and stood up with him, only barely struggling to do as it took him shifting his weight to gain traction on the tiled floor in socks. Kuni struggling in his hold didn't help anything, "The hell are you doing!?"

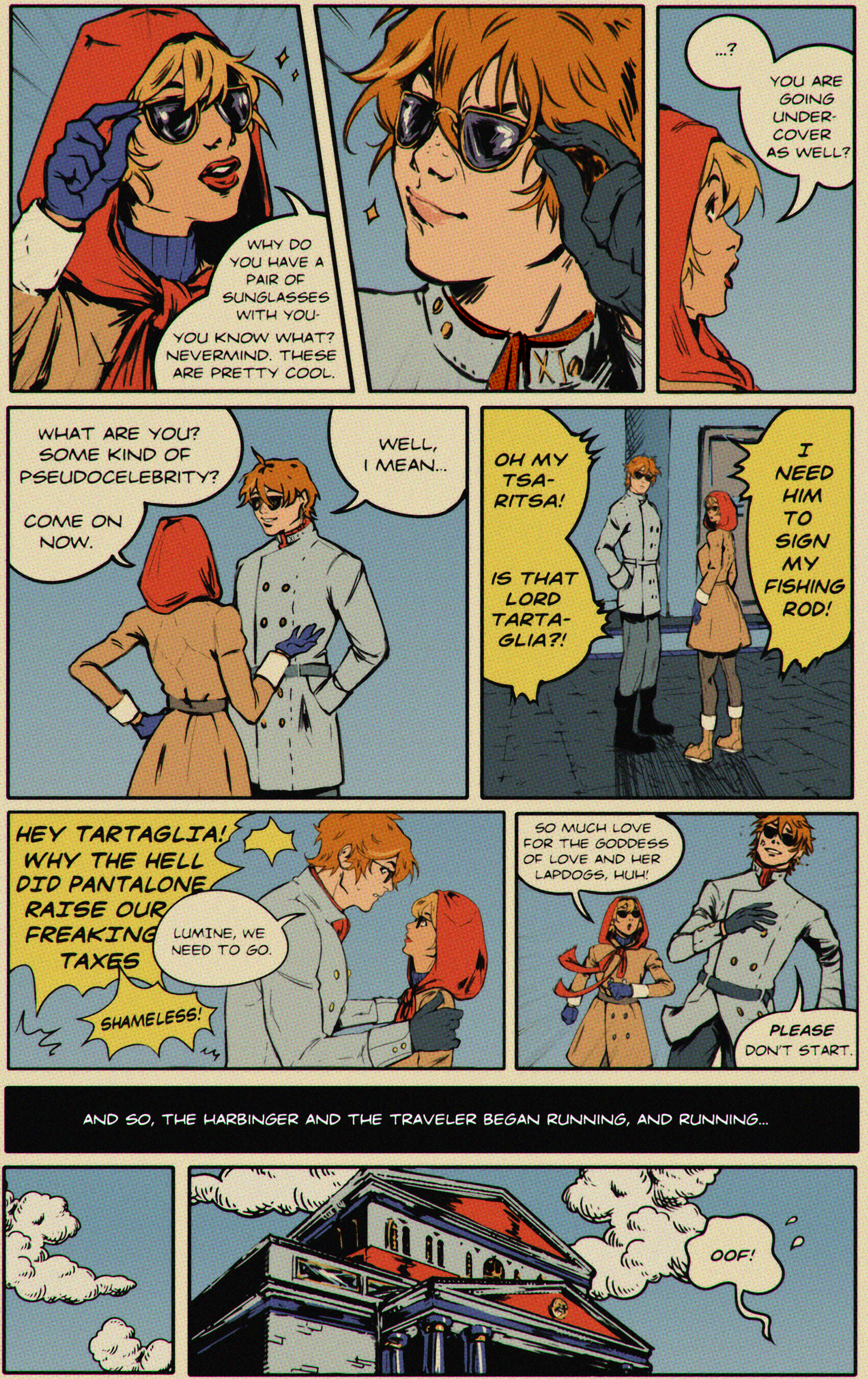
Ajax ignored him to walk the short step over to the mirror. It was hard to visualize what Kuni was doing, but what he had in mind was nothing in comparison to what he was actually looking at. He was given a smokey eye look with a light, glitter shadow starting in his inner corner to fade out into a darker shade. His eyeliner was rich and sharp, but unfortunately Ajax's wiggling had an effect on the look since the right side looked slightly thicker than the left, but he didn't care. He loved it.

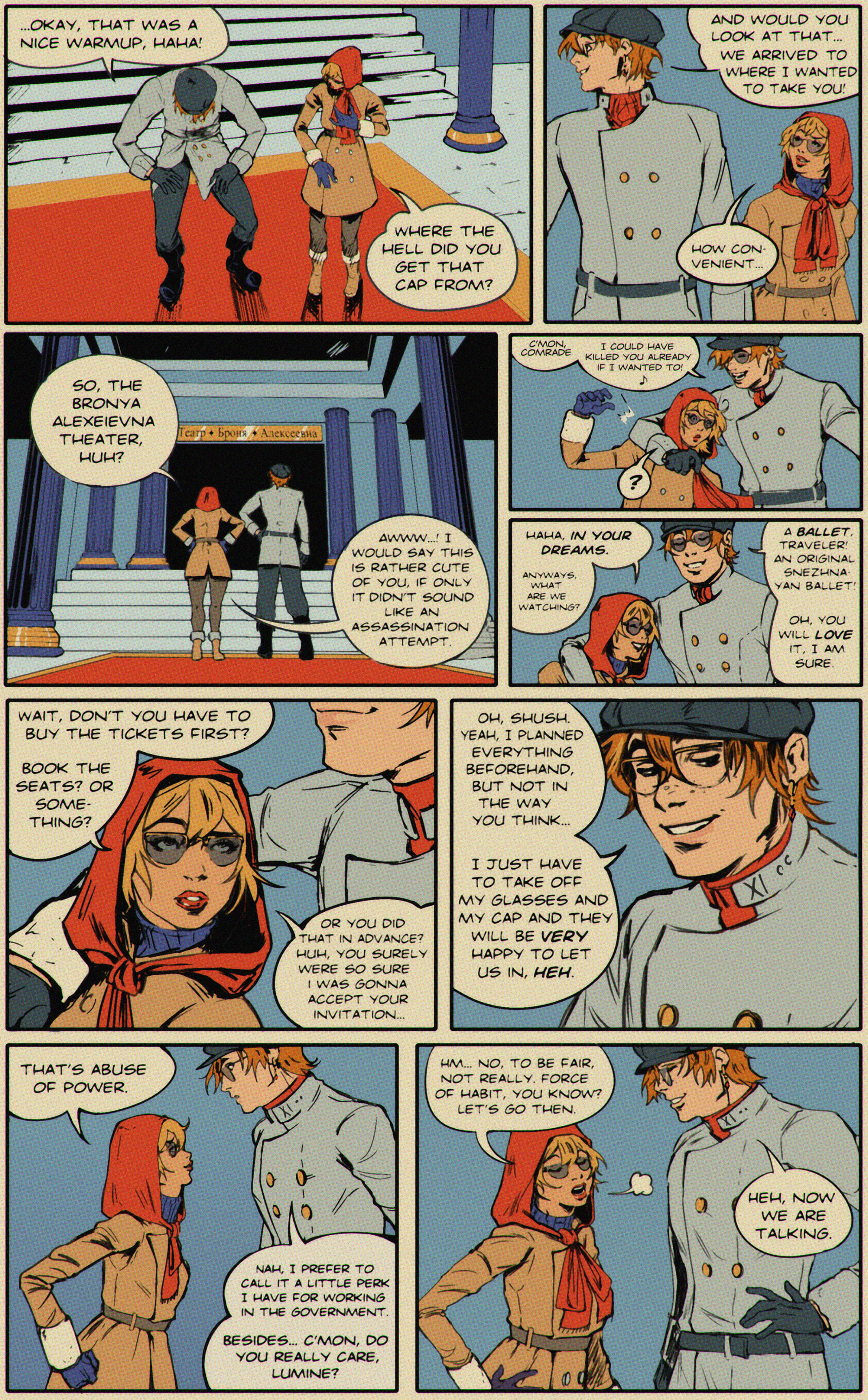
"Damn, I look *really* hot." Ajax admired himself, tilting his head around with bedroom eyes to check his best angle and pursing his unpainted lips. "You did amazing!"

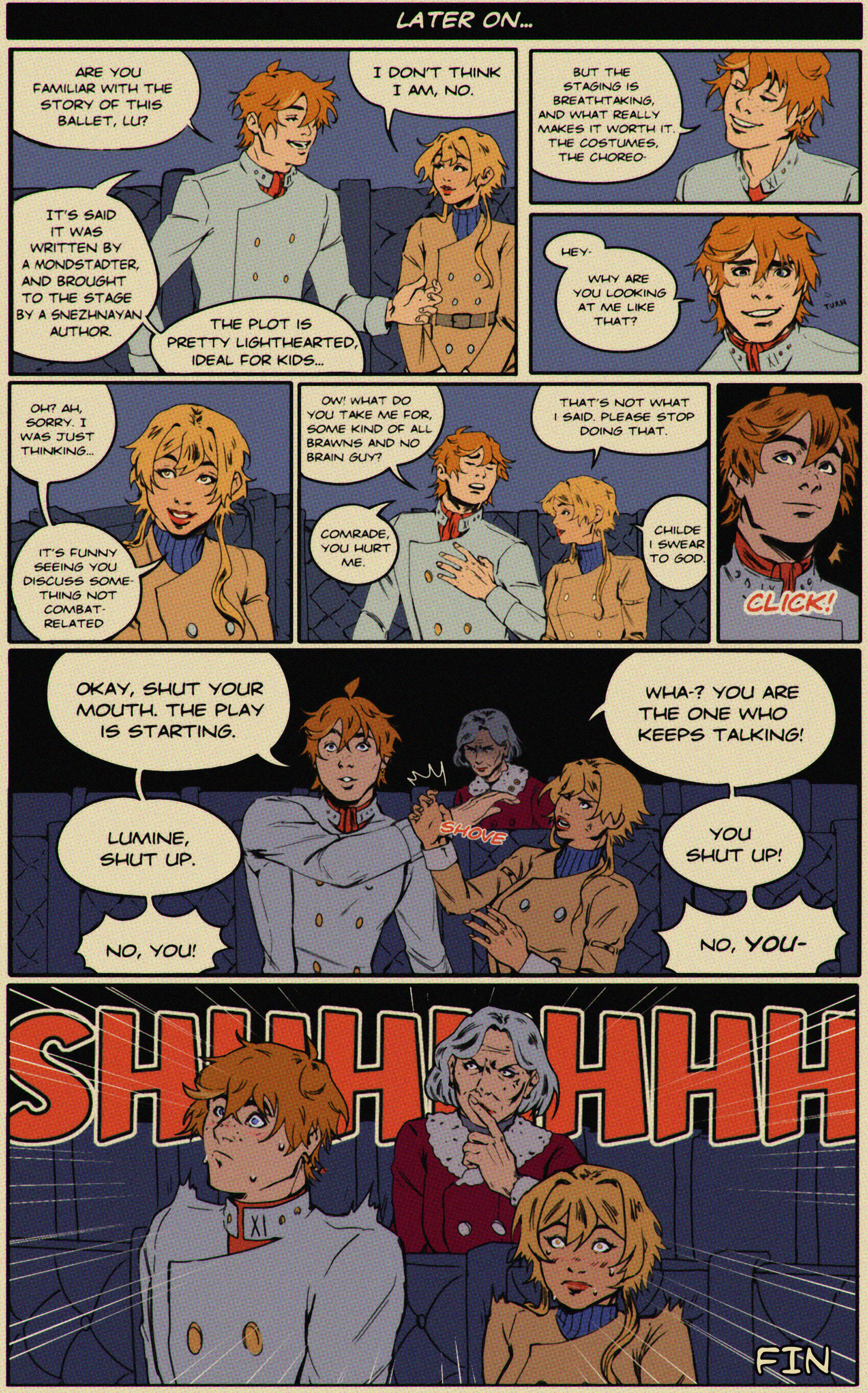
"Okay, great, now put me down." Kuni waved off his compliments while still pushing at his shoulders.

Ajax just held onto him tighter. "Let's take a picture!" And with Kuni still in his arms, Ajax left the bathroom to find his phone and do just that.


SNEZHNAYA
OKAY, BLONDIE.
WHILE WE ARE IN SNEZHNAYA, YOU SHOULD WEAR THIS.
AFTER ALL... YOU HAVE A BOUNTY ON YOUR HEAD.
YEAH, OF COURSE I DO...
NO, REALLY. LOOK OVER THERE.
GASP! I REALLY AM A WANTED CRIMINAL... AGAIN!
AND WHY DID YOU DRAW ME SO UGLY?!
I DON'T LOOK LIKE THIS AT ALL!
ПЕРСОНА НОН ГРАТА
Я тупая
EH, YOU KINDA DO.
RUDE.
SUPER RUDE.
NOW, PUT THESE ON TOO.
SUN-GLASSES?


WHY DO YOU HAVE A PAIR OF SUNGLASSES WITH YOU- YOU KNOW WHAT? NEVERMIND. THESE ARE PRETTY COOL.
...?
YOU ARE GOING UNDER-COVER AS WELL?
WHAT ARE YOU? SOME KIND OF PSEUDOCELEBRITY?
COME ON NOW.
WELL, I MEAN...
OH MY TSA-RITSA!
IS THAT LORD TARTA-GLIA?!
I NEED HIM TO SIGN MY FISHING ROD!
HEY TARTAGLIA! WHY THE HELL DID PANTALONE RAISE OUR FREAKING TAXES
SHAMELESS!
LUMINE, WE NEED TO GO.
SO MUCH LOVE FOR THE GODDESS OF LOVE AND HER LAPDOGS, HUH!
PLEASE DON'T START.
AND SO, THE HARBINGER AND THE TRAVELER BEGAN RUNNING, AND RUNNING...
OOF!


...OKAY, THAT WAS A NICE WARMUP, HAHA!
WHERE THE HELL DID YOU GET THAT CAP FROM?
AND WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT... WE ARRIVED TO WHERE I WANTED TO TAKE YOU!
HOW CON- VENIENT...
SO, THE BRONYA ALEXEIEVNA THEATER, HUH?
Театр ✦ Броня ✦ Алексеевна
AWWW...! I WOULD SAY THIS IS RATHER CUTE OF YOU, IF ONLY IT DIDN'T SOUND LIKE AN ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT.
C'MON, COMRADE
I COULD HAVE KILLED YOU ALREADY IF I WANTED TO! ♪
?
HAHA, *IN YOUR DREAMS.*
ANYWAYS, WHAT ARE WE WATCHING?
A *BALLET*, TRAVELER! AN ORIGINAL SNEZHNAYAN BALLET!
OH, YOU WILL *LOVE* IT, I AM SURE.
WAIT, DON'T YOU HAVE TO BUY THE TICKETS FIRST?
BOOK THE SEATS? OR SOME- THING?
OR YOU DID THAT IN ADVANCE? HUH, YOU SURELY WERE SO SURE I WAS GONNA ACCEPT YOUR INVITATION...
OH, SHUSH. YEAH, I PLANNED EVERYTHING BEFOREHAND, BUT NOT IN THE WAY YOU THINK...
I JUST HAVE TO TAKE OFF MY GLASSES AND MY CAP AND THEY WILL BE *VERY* HAPPY TO LET US IN, *HEH.*
XI
THAT'S ABUSE OF POWER.
NAH, I PREFER TO CALL IT A LITTLE PERK I HAVE FOR WORKING IN THE GOVERNMENT.
BESIDES... C'MON, DO YOU REALLY CARE, LUMINE?
HM... NO, TO BE FAIR, NOT REALLY. FORCE OF HABIT, YOU KNOW? LET'S GO THEN.
HEH, NOW WE ARE TALKING.


LATER ON...
ARE YOU FAMILIAR WITH THE STORY OF THIS BALLET, LU?
I DON'T THINK I AM, NO.
IT'S SAID IT WAS WRITTEN BY A MONDSTADTER, AND BROUGHT TO THE STAGE BY A SNEZHNAYAN AUTHOR.
THE PLOT IS PRETTY LIGHTHEARTED, IDEAL FOR KIDS...
BUT THE STAGING IS BREATHTAKING, AND WHAT REALLY MAKES IT WORTH IT. THE COSTUMES, THE CHOREO-
HEY-
WHY ARE YOU LOOKING AT ME LIKE THAT?
TURN
OH? AH, SORRY. I WAS JUST THINKING...
IT'S FUNNY SEEING YOU DISCUSS SOME- THING NOT COMBAT- RELATED
OW! WHAT DO YOU TAKE ME FOR, SOME KIND OF ALL BRAWNS AND NO BRAIN GUY?
COMRADE, YOU HURT ME.
THAT'S NOT WHAT I SAID. PLEASE STOP DOING THAT.
CHILDE I SWEAR TO GOD.
CLICK!
OKAY, SHUT YOUR MOUTH. THE PLAY IS STARTING.
LUMINE, SHUT UP.
NO, YOU!
SHOVE
WHA-? YOU ARE THE ONE WHO KEEPS TALKING!
YOU SHUT UP!
NO, *YOU-*
SHHHHHHH
XI
FIN

My Home Is Yours

It starts with a letter from Tonia.

The paper still rests between his thumb and forefinger, slightly crumpled there from the force of his clumsy grip. In the looseness of the late hour and free-flowing alcohol, he'd pulled it out to tell Zhongli something she'd said, something he thought was rather funny, an anecdote about Teucer. Who else could she be writing about? He'd threatened to leave for Liyue again, if only to meet the Toy Historian–Zhongli–of Childe's letters. He'd only been pacified with the promise of syrniki from Childe's own personal recipe, and would he please mail Tonia instructions at once before their rebel brother could disappear again?

"What a rascal!" Childe finishes with a laugh, fumbling to grip at his chopsticks properly again.

"It seems to run in the family," Zhongli remarks, dry as Childe's sadly empty cup, though he regards Childe more curiously now than with any exasperation. "Recipe?" he prompts, pausing in his somehow deft consumption of noodles. He doesn't think he's seen anyone eat any kind of noodle tidily, but if anyone could pull it off, it would be Zhongli.

"Ah, yes," Childe laughs lightly. "I used to cook a lot back home, you know. It was… a good outlet for whenever I had too much excess energy. I can't take too much credit though. I learned most of those recipes from my grandparents."

"I did not realize you enjoyed cooking…" Zhongli's forehead pinches together some, and his mouth twitches downward as his gaze seems to penetrate deep into his noodles, as though searching for something lost in the layers of dough and sauce. "We've known each other quite a while now, and yet I don't believe I've seen you cook a single meal."

Surprised, Childe removes his elbows from their resting place on the table and straightens from his overly-comfortable slouch. "It never came up," he says, "I've had plenty to do here, for the most part, and my rooms don't have a kitchen. It's easier to eat out." *With you*, he leaves out, but it hovers in the air nonetheless.

Zhongli seems to pick that up all the same, or at least he must have, because the words that come out of his mouth next nearly topple Childe in a way no battle ever has. "Then my home is yours."

Blinking away the fog of the Liuli baijiu, Childe leans forward a little closer, wondering in his half drunken state that maybe if he can see Zhongli a little more clearly, perhaps he'll realize he misheard. He's had a little too much tonight, too lost in the moment of basking in Zhongli's presence again after so many weeks apart. "Sorry, xiansheng, what was that you said?"

For his part, Zhongli looks as unfazed as ever, the several empty jars of alcohol at the side of the table doing little to shake his person. He delicately places his chopsticks down and clasps his hands in front of him to regard Childe directly, eyes twinkling with what Childe is certain is mirth at what must be his very alcohol-flushed face. "If you ever desired to utilize a functioning kitchen while in Liyue, my home is yours. As you said, the rooms at the Baiju Guesthouse lack personal kitchens."

Childe can only continue to stare at him, speechless. He must look like a fool, his mouth hanging half open, paralyzed by Zhongli's gaze alone.

How did he get here?

When he'd taken his first steps onto Liyue's docks, if some passerby had told him that he'd be taking meals with Rex Lapis every day for the foreseeable future, he'd have laughed in their face, then maybe asked if they considered the blood of a god to be the meals in question? After all, he'd had every plan to bask in the defeat of the god who once dared to rule above war.

But, well. Now here he is, struggling foolishly with Liyue's cutlery of choice, with the god of the land watching him with unmistakable amusement. And an invitation to his personal home.

It's… a first. It goes without saying that they've long ago crossed the threshold between business associates and friends. Even the brief rift between them after Zhongli revealed his true identity hadn't been enough to set them back. If anything, despite the acid churn of betrayal in his belly, it had only made Childe want to get closer, to dig his nails into the promised flesh of the God of Contracts and see what made him tick, what made him bleed.

Recollecting himself, he picks at his own stir fry in a way he hopes isn't too clumsy, and tries his best to paint a teasing smile on his face for Zhongli. "Are you inviting me over for dinner, xiansheng?"

That's enough for Zhongli to pause and blink, surprise stretching his brows upward before they settle down into something far more contemplative. "I… had not considered it that way, truthfully, but rather, I only sought to offer you a piece of my home for your own comfort, especially if you missed the food you grew up with. Were I to invite you to my home for dinner, it would be rude of me as the host to expect you to cook a meal for the both of us. However, seeing as you do not have access to a kitchen, there is no other place for us to dine in a private setting, and the thought of doing so is admittedly appealing." He pauses and meets Childe's eyes almost guiltily. "And… I would very much like to try your cooking."

It's always a pleasure to watch the inner-workings of Zhongli's mind slip from his tongue and into the air, much like opening a clockface to watch the gears align perfectly into the pitch circle of their partner over and over again. It's familiar, methodical, almost predictable, but the magic of its motion is enough to keep Childe watching every time without fail. The more Zhongli puzzles out his logic, the wider he can feel his smile get.

"Then consider me your personal chef tomorrow evening," Childe says, and bows from his seat with a flourish. "I'll do my best to impress even your gourmet tongue."

Zhongli only smiles, his lips just barely tugging upward, and returns his attention to his meal. "Knowing the fervor with which you approach even the smallest of victories, I would expect nothing less."

* * *

When Childe returns home that night, a little more wine drunk and a little more contemplative, he realizes he has no idea what to make for Zhongli. What could he possibly cook the man that suited his refined tastes? Most of what he cooks at home is seafood related, and Liyue being a harbor, most of what he's learned to cook here also contains some form of seafood or another. He could of course cook something where the salty tang of the sea is masked by the rest of the ingredients, but… he'd rather cook Zhongli something that he is guaranteed to at least enjoy, if not claim it as his favorite.

There's also the matter of novelty. For as long as he's known the man, it's easy to spot the moments of wonder that glitter in his eyes, when something new or particularly unique graces his vision. For being a six thousand year old ex-Archon, there should be little that surprises him, and yet he engages with the world as though a youth, each experience somehow new to him, each item collected something he claims to have never seen before, even knowing its impossible that he hadn't.

Something from Snezhnaya would be the best choice almost definitely, he thinks as he peels his clothes off for the night, damp with sweat from all the wine and the humid night air. That would almost certainly be something new. But what dish? What dish? What to make for a man so particular, so discerning?

It's this question that he falls asleep to, halfway under the sheets of his bed, gaze directed skyward in sleepy thought.

Morning—and sobriety—brings new clarity as he prepares himself for the day, and he quickly hurries out of the apartment for his ingredients.

Thankfully, Ivanovich's stall is stocked when he arrives there the following morning, the merchant rubbing his hands together in the chilled, foggy morning air. Childe's long been used to the damp and the cold, but nevertheless, the Liyue damp has a particularly special way of clinging to clothes and skin, even in the (somewhat) colder mornings. The material of his uniform hugs him uncomfortably as he approaches the stand, and Ivanovich, in his much thicker clothes, looks equally uncomfortable as he begins to set out his wares. It looks as though he's just received a fresh shipment from Snezhnaya.

“Ivanovich!” Childe greets with a smile as he approaches. “Good morning to you.”

“Master Childe!” he replies warmly, setting down a small package of crispbread. Childe almost winces at the formality, especially with how casually Ivanovich has his customers address him, but some things can't be avoided for the sake of secrecy. His title as Harbinger will always bar him from the friendly intimacy of exchanging names.

“And a good morning to you!” Ivanovich continues. “Lucky that you came so early. You know how quickly I sell out.”

Indeed he does. Rarely does he come across his stall with more than a scant few products left. Even with the reduced Fatui presence in Liyue, there are still plenty of Snezhnayans making their living here, and the nostalgic call of a warm stew on a winter's night more than easily draws in the customers.

With a long-suffering sigh, Childe comes to a halt just beside the newly placed crispbread. “I'm never even in time to place items on hold with you,” he says, slipping into Snezhnayan and leaning forward with an accusatory pout. “You won't even leave caviar aside for me.”

“I can,” Ivanovich says, holding up a jar of said caviar and handing it to Childe, “but you must be here in time to offer the right price.”

Gratefully, he takes the jar, lending his sunniest smile in response. “Well, it seems at last I've accomplished the first step, and you know I'm always good for the second. Now as for the rest of my shopping list…”

He hands over the slip of paper on which he'd hastily scrawled his list this morning as he'd hurried from his rooms. It's rare he's awake this early now, when the first rays of morning have just hit the lapping waves of the Harbor's docks. During his younger days as a Fatui foot soldier, he'd been awake before dawn every morning, but Childe the banker, Childe the diplomat… he allows himself a little extra sleep in the mornings, especially if it means longer nights with a certain someone.

Ivanovich squints a little as his eyes flit across the list, nodding to himself the further he gets. “Yes, yes I think I can cover you for most of this, though I have to say, this is much longer than your usual list.”

Perfect. Childe beams. “I've managed to come into the privilege of kitchen access! But of course, I must pay the owner with a proper Snezhnayan meal.”

“No fish?” Ivanovich asks, frowning at the list.

At this, Childe laughs. “No, no fish. One might say I have a picky eater on my hands.”

“How do you intend to introduce someone to Snezhnayan… never mind,” Ivanovich mutters, and begins to gather the listed items for him. In the end, Childe walks away with several jars of sauerkraut, a jar of gherkins, sour cream, some smoked sausages from western Snezhnaya, and a few sprigs of dill. Everything else he can easily pester Dongsheng for on the way to Zhongli's house after work.

Northland Bank thankfully possesses an icebox in the employee break room, where he carefully stores his treasures for the work day in between a suspicious looking bowl wrapped in cloth that Childe is certain he saw there the last time he was in Liyue and a very large jar of tea that he's equally certain has fermented. He makes a mental note to inform Ekaterina that a clean out is long overdue as he closes the door.

Evening comes like spring in Snezhnaya, slowly and with great reluctance. By the time he's able to leave his office for the day, amid the various bits of dreaded paperwork and managerial meetings, Childe feels as though millions of microscopic electro slimes have taken residence on his skin, buzzing with enough energy to shatter even the thickest pane of glass. He gathers his belongings, the purchased ingredients, and leaves.

His first stop is Second Life, where he gathers the remaining ingredients for the night, impatiently drumming his fingers on the table as Dongsheng calculates the final cost, if only to let loose some of the energy he's pent up throughout the day. And then it's to Zhongli's apartment, the sun having long set, where the windows glow a welcoming cor lapis, not unlike the eyes of its owner. Its door is a familiar sight, one he's approached many an evening to see a certain consultant home, but not once has he passed through its entrance, only seen the hint of an expansive entry way of warm brown and amber, of elaborate paintings, of shelves lined with trinkets before the door gently closes on him.

Today is different though.

Setting his rather burdensome set of bags down, he takes one deep breath, and then raps on the door with the back of one knuckle.

It's a moment before there's the soft sound of footsteps against hardwood, a gentle, approaching *tmp tmp tmp*, and then the harsh clacking of a latch coming undone, and at last the door opens to reveal one Zhongli.

“Childe,” he says, blinking owlishly, and then his face breaks into a soft, pleased smile, one that rarely graces his face, but is always gratifying to see. “I was beginning to think you were caught by a debt collection trip.”

Unable to help himself, Childe smiles back, the electricity crawling along his skin surging with the giddiness kept under careful lock and key during the daylight hours. “I always keep my promises, xiansheng,” he says, taking the opportunity to unclip his boots now that his hands aren't full. “I hope you're hungry.”

Zhongli only hums, smile still in place and eyes crinkling at the corners as he gathers a few of the various bags on the ground before him. “You can put your shoes in the corner there,” he murmurs as Childe straightens, dipping his head towards a cabinet on the left, which, when opened, Childe finds a variety of shoes of different fashions precisely placed together. He tucks his own boots in an empty space, and closes the cabinet door with a delicate click.

“You know,” he says as he straightens again, eyes scanning the room until at last his eyes fall on Zhongli's retreating, grocery-laden figure. “Somehow, I started assuming you morphed your clothes rather than buying them.”

A huff of breath, and then, “I can't possibly know what you mean. I'm just a mortal man.”

“Of course,” Childe says with a wide smile as he crosses the room to follow behind him and into the kitchen. It's small, which is to be expected of any apartment, with just enough room for two people to work together, though it looks hardly used, pristine and nearly bare of anything save for a few bare essentials. A cluster of garlic and dried chilis hangs from the ceiling behind the counter and stove, along with a few pots and pans on the wall. Childe takes the opportunity to grab a large soup pot, flipping it in his hands a few times, before turning back to Zhongli, who is carefully unpacking all of Childe's groceries.

“Don't cook much, xiansheng?” he asks, taking the opportunity to wash his hands.

The man has the sense to look abashed, sheepishly avoiding Childe's gaze as he removes the dill from a bag. “I… don't need to eat as often as… others. So I rarely find the need to make use of the kitchen,” he says.

“Not so mortal, after all,” Childe teases, and begins poking around various drawers and cabinets for the necessary utensils, handing them to Zhongli as he comes across each one, who then places them on the empty spaces of the counter in a neat row. For his part, Zhongli takes it in stride, watching Childe with a mix of catlike intensity and a calm, almost sedated interest, only pausing to give his own hands a rinse. He seems to take little issue with Childe rattling around his kitchen without express permission, instead watching him with what appears to be a pleased fascination.

It's odd, seeing him like this, undone and relaxed in a space as domestic as his apartment kitchen. Only his button-down shirt remains from his daywear, the vest and coat having been long since discarded. Childe's seen him forego his coat during warm summer evenings over a bottle of wine or two, but never the vest.

Something in his chest settles at the sight.

Returning his focus to their soon-to-be meal, he passes Zhongli the bag of cherries he picked up at Second Life. “For dessert,” he explains at Zhongli's questioning blink. “Mind chopping those in half?”

“Dessert seems… rather far off,” Zhongli says, but takes the cherries from him anyway.

“Don't worry, I'll give you a proper meal,” Childe says with a laugh, murmuring a soft “aha” with the discovery of a mixing bowl. “I just want to get started on it. Have you folded jiaozi before?”

A huff of breath escapes Zhongli at that, whether in humor or disdain, Childe isn't sure. “Hmm… If I recall correctly, jiaozi were first served as a treatment for frostbitten ears during a particularly harsh winter worsened by a poor business year. This was before the Archon Wars, during the time of the Guili Assembly. A particularly adept doctor took it upon himself to find more effective treatments with the quickly deteriorating weather. The ingredients he chose, if memory serves, were lamb, black pepper, chives and… jueyun peppers,” Zhongli finishes, his knife coming down with a soft clunk, slicing open the first of the cherries.

“That's not a yes,” Childe points out, fighting a smile.

“It's been some time since I've had the opportunity to do so, admittedly,” Zhongli says, fingers delicately plucking the cherry pit from its bed of soft flesh. “But yes, I have folded them before and very successfully, too. But what, Childe, do jiaozi have to do with cherries?”

“It's a Snezhnayan dessert! Vareniki, though don't ask me to give you its long and illustrious history. It's just a dessert my little siblings like, so I thought I'd share with you. My older sister would make it for us whenever we did particularly well in school." Childe pauses as he finds Zhongli's bag of flour, and smiles. "As I'm sure you can imagine, I did not get these very often."

"Troublemaker," Zhongli comments.

"You know me! Anyway, I'm going to make and roll out some dough here, and when that's done, if you don't mind folding them with the cherry filling, we can boil them later for dessert. I'll work on the main course while you do the folding! Although, it takes a while to cook, if you don't mind."

"Not at all. A very efficient plan," Zhongli says, nodding his assent, and returns to his task. In the meantime, Childe turns his attention to the dough, mixing the flour, salt and cold water together, then laying it out to knead, and at last rolling it out. By the time he's finished, Zhongli has long since completed his task, once more watching Childe with quiet fascination. He feels a bit like a bug under a microscope, though perhaps in a less sinister manner than when working with Il Dottore, so he flashes Zhongli a smile and hands him the sugar to mix in with the cherries.

"If you don't mind fooolding that, I'll get dinner started," he says, turning his attention to the soup pot he'd pulled out earlier. The plan is to make solyanka. It's not the most complicated stew in the world, nor does it come close to something noble enough to feed even an ex-Archon, but it's the one that reminds him of home the most (outside of any seafood related recipes). If he wants to cook a Snezhnayan dish for Zhongli, it'd have to be this one. It's the first dish he had on his return from the Abyss, his mother still unaware of his inner transformation and insisting he get some meat back on his bones. It was the first dish he'd eaten in the Fatui training camps, watery and unpleasant though it had been. And it, somehow, had been the dish served for his first dinner with the Tsaritsa, to which she'd murmured in her quiet way, that no dish is beneath her. It's a dish that has followed him through the biggest firsts of his life. It feels fitting, somehow, to make it for a first homemade meal with Zhongli.

He won't think too long about what exactly that means.

Instead, he sets another pot to boil and fills it with mushrooms, then begins cooking his chosen meats, first the pork belly, then the beef, then the sausages. Once cooked, he sets them aside and begins on the vegetables, sauteing them with butter and paprika until the onions are a transparent golden brown. Zhongli continues to watch through the entire process, eyes trained to Childe's movements, carefully cutting the dough and folding three cherry halves into each blanket with neat, perfect ridges.

"You're much more precise with your cooking than with your fighting," he comments at last as he pinches one vareniki into completion.

"Am I?" Childe asks with a laugh, adding the meat back into the pot with a quick scrape of his knife.

"Indeed. In battle, your movements are often erratic, built on some training yes, but it's clear much of it is instinctual. Inefficiencies abound. You waste your energy in excess and the mess after your battles is…" Zhongli pauses, a soft laugh seeming to burst from his lips, cherry flesh covered fingers jerking upward to cover his mouth. "Well, you are no stranger to the term 'bloodbath.'"

Childe supposes Zhongli never got so much as a drop of blood on those hands, no matter how many battles he's participated in. "It's more fun that way," he answers with a pout.

"Clearly," Zhongli says, drier than the Desert of Hadramaveth. "That being said, your cooking wastes no effort, precise in every cut that leaves little room for mess. The only casualty thus far has been the flour, but that was a necessary mess for the sake of the dough."

“Huh,” Childe says, carefully adding the boiled mushrooms and their water to the pot. “I can't say I ever trained to cook, though. I just like a clean space.” He pauses at Zhongli's raised eyebrow. “In the *kitchen*. The battlefield is a different story. That's a canvas to be painted on. The only canvas in the kitchen is in the dishware.”

“An interesting perspective,” Zhongli says, gaze returning to his task as he carefully carves a circle from the dough. “I hadn't considered that you might see both as an artform, rather than an enjoyable necessity. It's true that both are often referred to as artforms, but more often than not, they're treated as regrettable or tiresome necessities. It's rare to find someone who truly believes in these tasks as something beautiful. But I suppose that is often what distinguishes them from their peers.

“Take Xiangling, for example. It's clear in her efforts towards both taste and presentation that to her food is an artform rather than a means to an end. It is not to feed herself, but to engage herself. But her cooking is messy, unrefined with her youth, yet promising and revolutionary in her dedication to novelty. She is a star among the chefs of Liyue. And for you…” Zhongli pauses, folding and all, brows pinched thoughtfully. Childe adds the remainder of the ingredients for the time being as he waits, then douses the flame some to let the stew simmer.

“For you…” Zhongli continues. “The art in your battles is passion, which you aim to spread across the field, leaving no area of your canvas untouched. It is little wonder you were chosen as the Eleventh Harbinger. The art in your cooking, however, is precision. Your choices are exacting, your movements decisive, well-practiced. It's… very satisfying to watch.”

Childe feels very warm suddenly. Has he been wearing his scarf and jacket this entire time? He'd been so excited to begin cooking he'd forgotten to…

“Thank you, xiansheng,” he manages to get out between unwrapping his scarf and unclipping his jacket. He discards them across the back of one of Zhongli's chairs. “You flatter me.”

“I don't aim to,” Zhongli says matter-of-factly. “I'm merely voicing observations I've made.”

“All the same,” Childe mumbles, taking up his own dough to help fold.

“In any case,” Zhongli says, sealing another vareniki. “Dinner smells delightful, but you haven't yet told me what we'll be having. I can only hope to guess that it's a stew, but among all my abilities, mind reading isn't one of them.”

And thank the Tsaritsa for that. “It's solyanka,” Childe begins, lapsing into a brief explanation of what and how he's prepared the stew, his reasoning for his choice, and, at Zhongli's prompting, the many stories he's accumulated with this stew. Of Teucer putting in too much vinegar, of Tonia's slow and careful chopping, of Anthon's particular way of picking out each of the potatoes to save for last. They finish folding the vareniki as they talk, and Childe adds the remaining ingredients. By the time dinner is served, the moon is high in the sky, and if Zhongli was sedated before, there's a lively glint in his eye now.

They make tea to go with the meal, or rather Zhongli makes the tea, meticulous in every detail, though he allows Childe to pour it for them both when they take their seats with only a mild comment on his angle. And then it's dinner.

Zhongli has a small courtyard attached to his kitchen, a small door leading outward to reveal with stone table and chairs that they sit at, the night air sticky and cool and the faint song of katydids in the distance. Childe takes the first bite, unable to put off the growing rumble in his stomach any longer, and sighs with pleased satisfaction as the rich broth slides down his throat. It won't ever compare to that first night back in Snezhnaya from the Abyss, but it'll do.

Zhongli spoons at the stew, inspecting the ingredients with careful thought before finally partaking. His expression morphs from contemplative to a mellow content, brows relaxing as he takes another bite, humming this time and closing his eyes. Childe watches him carefully as he eats his own, unhurried now that he's got his eye on Zhongli.

"Well?" he prompts.

"Excellent," Zhongli murmurs. "I was not expecting it to have a more sour flavor, admittedly, but I should have known given the ingredients. It's balanced well though, the richness of the meat and the robustness of the mushroom preventing the tomato and gherkins from dominating the profile. It's a delightfully hearty stew, perfect for nights in Snezhnaya."

"Try it with the sour cream now," Childe prompts, passing the container.

"One more bite," Zhongli insists, holding up a hand and setting the sour cream aside. "The flavor is enjoyable as it is."

Childe laughs. "If you insist."

They lapse into silence, the only sounds now the clinking of their spoons against their bowls, the far off singing of katydids, and the chatter of the late night residents of Liyue making their slow and ambling way home. Zhongli does eventually spoon the sour cream in, eyes once more closing in pleasure as he takes another bite.

"Just excellent," he says. "I can't believe this is the first time I've been graced with your cooking. You must come over and use my kitchen again. My only price is that you let me share in whatever meal you cook."

Childe's laugh this time is much more strained, pausing in his meal to sit back for a moment. "Well… you know I'm only here for a brief visit… to tie some loose ends. I'll be returning to Snezhnaya here pretty shortly. I don't have an exact date yet, but I imagine it'll be within the month. I'm… not sure when I'll be back."

It's almost painful to watch the delight in Zhongli's eyes glaze over into something carefully neutral. He's known the man too long now to be able to interpret his expressions so easily, but this feels glaring even in the dark. "I see," Zhongli says, attention returning to his soup. "I knew your time here would be brief, but I had hoped…Well, never mind. No use lingering. I suppose then…"

He pauses, and Childe watches as Zhongli's grip on his spoon seems to tighten as he comes to a quiet decision, the half moons of his cuticles gleaming in the amber light of the lanterns in the courtyard. With regret? Resolve? He's unsure. "I suppose then there is no time like the present. Part of my retirement plans has always been to do some traveling, you see. I've been reluctant though, comfortable within the confines of the home I've resided in for so long, but this seems as good a time as any. When are you amenable to visits?"

"Visits?" Childe repeats, nearly dropping his spoon.

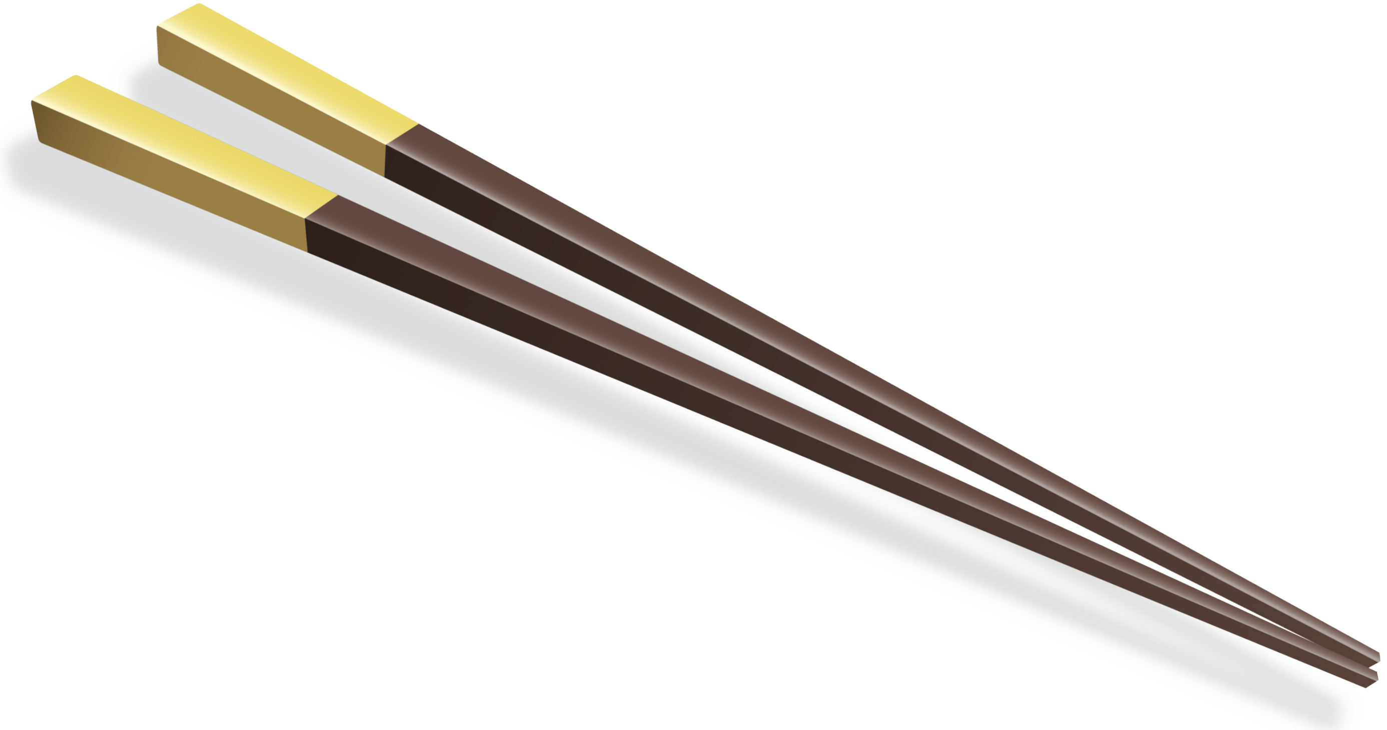
"Yes, visits. As a Harbinger, it goes without saying your time is filled with duties for your goddess. Battles, paperwork, meetings, and so on. Returning to Snezhnaya similarly means returning to your family and any duties you may be liable to there. I recall you mentioning that Tonia's birthday is approaching in the coming months. When I visit, I would prefer, as I'm sure would you, to arrive at a time that you don't find yourself split between hosting and your other responsibilities. I would hate to burden you with my presence."

“Xia-Xiansheng, I…” Childe stutters out before clearing his throat. He suddenly feels far too warm again, like he'd just swallowed half a jug of firewater. “You could never burden me with your presence. Name a date and I'll make time for you. If you wanted to come to Tonia's birthday, I'm sure she'd love to meet you.”

“I see…” Zhongli says, the corners of his mouth twitching upward in a small, heartfelt smile. “In that case, would you be amenable to me departing with you? I'll have to inform Director Hu of my vacation, but… I don't believe she'll mind much.”

His chest feels almost buoyant, a sailboat in a calm and sunny sea. “Of course, Zhongli-xiansheng,” he says with a bright smile.

“My home is yours.”



Comrades In Arms

Ajax's heart slows as he takes deep breaths, peering through the scope of his rifle. Hidden in a building still intact, he focuses on a little twitch in the distance behind the rubble and ashen remnants of Prekasnaya. Bunny, crow, or adversary; it's a different kind of roulette that even his own father wouldn't seem to understand.

He keeps an ear out for the shuffling of footsteps and detects an entity moving through the cover of the debris; chunks of concrete, metal, and wood. Any more shelling, the poor city might as well be wiped off the map. But alas, he finds an opening in the fray and waits patiently for his prey.

In between heartbeats, he catches sight of the enemy and pulls the trigger at record speed.

The body falls to the ground unceremoniously, a dull thud confirms his kill. Mission Complete.

* * *

Ajax gathers his supplies and throws his rifle over his shoulder, heading back to camp. The colonel should be waiting for him.

He hasn't seen the sun in days. Prekasnaya has seen more than enough devastation than any other city of his knowledge. What used to be a popular center for transportation and commerce is now the hotspot for death and bloodshed. It's hard to ignore the smell of rot from the corpses of his comrades and enemies, but it is particularly difficult to navigate through thick smoke in the darker hours.

The faint smell of rationed beans and bright orange hues tell him that his safe haven in this godforsaken hell is close. So the moment he reaches the closest fire, he drops his rucksack and rifle just to kneel comfortably towards the inviting heat, holding out his hands to defrost his fingertips.

A hunger pain hits the depths of his stomach and he curls into himself, tucking his head between his knees.

“Tartaglia.”

Ajax stands immediately at the calling of his name, saluting his colonel, whose voice is forever scarred into his brain. “Yes, sir?”

“Is the threat eliminated?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Was he a sniper or a scout?”

“Scout, sir. Although he wasn’t very good at being one.”

The colonel laughs, pulling out a cigar and lighting it at the fire. “This buys us time to advance on the Mondstadtian Sixth Army. We will attack them in two days.” He puts the cigar in his mouth and inhales the smoke. He blows it out after a minute of savoring the flavor, making rings that disappear in the never-ending gray. “Lead the rookies. They’re scared shitless.”

Ajax’s shoulders droop, “The rookies, sir?”

“Did I stutter, Tartaglia? It’s your job to keep the organization of that unit. Educate them.” He sneers, “I *did* assign *you* as a commissar, no? Please, *do* tell me if you have a problem with it.”

“No, sir. I do not have a problem. I will indeed… fulfill your assignment.”

The colonel smiles and pats Ajax on the shoulder, “You remind me of a puppy. The Tsaritsa commends your loyalty, boy.”

Traitors and deserters get shot in the back, something less honorable than dying for the motherland. One would prefer to be killed by their own than die at the hands of their rivals. Ajax could never forget when the colonel shot one of his comrades during their passage through the Prekrasnaya river when he tried to jump ship.

As one of the Fatui’s greatest snipers in the most influential position in the military, a political commissar, he has the absolute authorization to exercise that practice. He doesn’t want to in the slightest. The man who runs from the army misses his mother as much as Ajax misses his own, and he understands why he would. But he also cannot bear killing another subordinate for the sake of teaching a lesson.

He is not the same man he was when the war started. He used to charge into the front lines using brute force in vengeance for the Mondstadters destroying his hometown of Morepesok, now he’s more conservative and calculated. After learning that manpower alone isn’t enough to win a war, he picked up strategy. And the sniper.

* * *

Ajax finds himself running through the withered corridors of an apartment complex, dodging bullets that almost hit close to home. One grazes his shoulder as he hears voices yell after him, making him run faster. He cannot understand their words, but he hears their anger. He whips out his pistol and fires two warning shots behind him, missing both shots. So much for being an *expert* marksman.

He jumps over the stair railings and almost sprains his ankle when he hits the ground. Bullets drive him from his position as he continues his high-octane retreat.

Finally, he exits the building and jumps behind a pile of rubble to shield himself from his pursuers. His heart pounds in his chest at an alarming rate, terrible conditions for him to even use his rifle accurately. Nonetheless, he takes it into his hands while the voices get closer. Anywhere on the body, he tells himself, peeking over the rubble and aiming at one of the Mondstadters. He pulls the trigger and they go down, startling the other into an immense panic.

The sniper takes that moment to reload and take the other out.

A shuffling of an extra pair of feet snaps him back into his senses to reality, forcing him to look at his surroundings. He gasps when he sees an enemy staring directly at him.

They shoot, he dodges. Taking his pistol out, he pulls the trigger, but finds that the gun is out of ammunition. Flight.

Ajax runs into another Mondstadtian soldier and worries about a new problem in his hands. Two opponents down, and two more emerge. Then two become four. In no time, he's easily outnumbered.

Ever since that Liyuen interpreter wrote an article about Ajax saving his life, all of Snezhnaya knew his name and hailed him a hero. But as he runs for his own, clinging on the last two bullets for his rifle—he's reminded that while he's the Snezhnayan friend, he's the Mondstadtian foe.

He's thanking the Archons for allowing him to run this far; though his luck is already draining low. Bullets fling past him like locusts to a corn field, having some rip through his layered uniform and causing dark red to ooze out, adding to his collection of scars. A sting to his calf causes him to trip over a wooden beam hidden in the wreckage.

Now it's *his* turn to be shot in the back.

Quickly, he takes a grenade from a satchel on his waist and plucks the pin, holding it up to his aggressors, and muttering a silent prayer before throwing it. A blast forms on impact causing him to shield himself from the soil and soot that flies amongst the fog.

Once the dust settles, he takes a peek, confirming that he's eliminated his threats. His leg injury bleeds like a fountain, pain like a hot iron. Ajax grits his teeth and crawls behind a battered partition. He tries to find something that can be of use as a tourniquet and shakes his head to find nothing. He had used the last of his bandages on a man who died anyway.

Ajax bites his lip and comes up with a solution. Gathering his sniper rifle once more, he yanks off the strap and ties *that* around his calf to halt the bleeding.

The commissar breathes a sigh of relief, but that relief is short-lived. The cock of a gun drains the color of his face and he fumbles to reload his rifle. And just as he secures the ammunition in its gauge, two shots ring out, frightening him. A groan. A thump. A gait.

Ajax peeks over the partition and aims towards the sound of footsteps and sees a man walking towards him with his hands in the air. The stranger wears an Allied Resistance uniform, dark navy hair tucked in a bun. In an instant, his scowl softens as his fingers uncurl from the trigger, tense shoulders dropping. He almost feels like crying—the Archons sent an angel to save him.

“Can you walk?”

Ajax exhales, his body throbbing from overexertion, and nods weakly.

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"Ajax Tartaglia," the man smiles, tending to his wound. "I've heard about you everywhere. And by *everywhere*, I mean the ladies cannot *shut up* about you."

The soldier looks around the room. It's an underground shelter where civilians come to hide before fleeing the city, or even where soldiers recuperate after being found injured on the field. A fireplace is lit in the leftmost wall of the room, where two children sit, playing with dolls made of sticks and colored cotton. A few women gossip in the corner, occasionally casting glances in his direction. Though his attention is dutifully brought back to the angel that delivered him.

"What's your name?" He asks the stranger.

"My name is not important."

"I want to know it anyway."

The stranger finishes wrapping a fresh layer of gauze to his calf, now stable and stitched up. He stands up to wash his hands at what seems to be one of five working sinks in the whole damn city, before sitting back down next to him and patting a wet cloth to a gash on his temple. Ajax awaits his answer, and his patience is rewarded.

"Kaeya."

"Thank you, Kaeya."

An ointment stings as it is applied to his wound, but gentle touches make him feel more at ease. "Of course."

For the next hour, as he finally calms down from his adrenaline rush and the pain settles in, he watches Kaeya make rounds around the shelter, tending to the other wounded he has under his wing. He also mingles with the civilians, their laughter quiet and discreet. The children pull and tug on his pant legs in order to get his attention. In the firelight, his hair is a pretty sheen of deep blue compared to when he is put against the backdrop of smog.

His heart swells so much at the sight of the man that he squeezes his eyes shut and turns away. He is only grateful, that's all.

He gets nervous whenever Kaeya is even a few meters from him. The memory of his touch burns his skin like a brand to a cow on a butcher's farm. Prekasnaya chills him down to the bone, but that electric contact makes his palms sweat. Ajax has seen his fair share of beautiful nurses from hospitals all around the front, but none have transcended the ethereal being that Kaeya is.

That face could be plastered all over Snezhnayan newspapers and rally up a storm about such beauty. But who is Ajax to revel in something as shallow as appearance? His charm wins bright smiles from the women of the camp and leaves the children parading around him for even an ounce of attention. Not to mention how nimble and meticulous his fingers work when stitching an open wound or brewing herbs to make concoctions to help with pain. What about his bravery when he heads out in the evening to look for more wounded to bring to the shelter?

It's been a couple days, and Ajax is getting sick of resting.

He tries to pull himself up from the blankets, and Kaeya notices his haste.

The man approaches his side and lays a hand on the markman's shoulder. Ajax grabs it and looks him into the eyes. Stars sharpen within those periwinkle irises. "Tartaglia, I suggest you don't stress—"

"I need some fresh air."

Kaeya's expression softens as he purses his lips. He offers his elbow for Ajax to take. “Allow me.”

They sit under the remains of a demolished convenience store near the entrance to the camp. There are enough openings in the establishment to allow the cold air to flow into Ajax's lungs, enough to cleanse the soot and congestion of the underground. It's too quiet here, and it makes him anxious.

He stares up into the smoggy sky and exhales, “How long will I have to stay here?”

“Eager to leave, aren't you?” Kaeya scoffs. “Give it a few more days. You bled quite a lot.”

“Hm. I wonder if the colonel noticed my absence.”

The resistance member lifts himself to a squat and peeks over the wall. Once he confirms that there are no threats, he stands and stretches, yawning. It causes Ajax to yawn, also. Kaeya smirks when he notices, adjusting the rifle strap on his shoulder. “I'll have one of the ladies inform him of your whereabouts. Where are you stationed?”

“Snezhnayan Eleventh Army. I led a regiment of newbies and most of them either were killed or deserted. I didn't bother with the deserters because I shot a comrade in the back once and realized that he wanted to go home just as much as I did, and I took that away from him.” He brings his attention to a spider web in the corner of the room, sighing. Guilt inundated his every being, and going back to the Eleventh Army was the last thing he wanted to do. “Not sure why he thought it was a good idea to promote me to a position of leadership. I was left with more questions than answers and *now* look at me.”

“Will you get in trouble?”

“Who knows?” He finally looks up at Kaeya, who already has his eyes on him. The sky is white; white like the walls that line his parent's bedroom, except for the ornate roses and carnations painted along the upper edges. For a moment he visualizes Kaeya standing against that wall and lines flowers atop his head.

“We should get to telling him then, lest he already thinks you've gone AWOL.” The man extends a hand out to him to help him to his feet, but Ajax's mind flashes him memories of a time he doesn't know. There stands Kaeya in his parent's home, dressed in Sunday clothing, hand caressing his cheek. That white wall...

He opens his eyes—wondering when they were last closed, and sees Kaeya's face close to his. Ajax feels a warm thumb wipe away a tear and realizes that he brought Kaeya's hand to his cheek instead of using it as an aid to stand up. He jolts at the realization and the man backs away as Ajax desperately tries to wipe his own tears himself.

“I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking—”

“It's alright, Ajax. I didn't mind.”

He wipes his wet hands on his scarf and clears his throat, trying to regain his composure. His face reddens at the sight of Kaeya. That patient, *patient* man. “Can you... do it again?”

* * *

Ajax is kneeling in front of a boiling pot of stew, stirring in ingredients while listening to a little boy ramble on about the cool airplanes he saw in the sky. Whether those planes have the Star of the allied League or the Cross of the enemy Legion, it's best that he doesn't know. It reminds him of his youngest brother...how innocent he is. He brings the ladle to his lips and blows before sipping on it cautiously, smiling at the product. He pats the boy on the head and asks him to try it too, face beaming once he tasted the stew.

Though just as he dips the ladle back into the pot, the ground shakes.

His eyes dart across the lodging for Kaeya and sees that he's also on high alert. The ladies in the room stand from their chairs and exchange their knitting gear for firearms as Kaeya grabs his rifle and makes his way to a peephole and examines their condition.

He clicks his tongue. “Ladies, take the children and wounded to safety through the tunnel. Those aren't Allied uniforms."

His voice is calm but stern, refraining from making too much noise. The air turned thick as everyone scurried around to pack supplies and rally up their numbers to carry every injured soldier through a tight space well hidden inside the fireplace. Ajax takes the little airplane boy in his arms and hands him to one of the women there and grabs his sniper. The ground rumbles with every step, and soon he could hear the voices from outside getting louder.

Ajax takes his place next to Kaeya as he's organizing medical supplies into tattered duffel bags and whispers to him, “I'm here. What are my orders?"

“You're still recovering. Go with the women and children."

“And leave you here? As the sole gatekeeper? That won't do, Kaeya. What if something happens to you?"

“This isn't my first siege. I know what to do."

Ajax takes Kaeya's forearm and pleads to him, “Please. You're important to these people. They would be devastated if you never emerge from that tunnel after everything blows over. Let me stay."

“I'm part of the resistance, Ajax. This is my *job*. They will meet my brother at the end of that tunnel and they will be taken care of. Whether I see the end of that tunnel or not, that is my duty." He pulls away from Ajax and loads his rifle. “You're Snezhnaya's beacon of hope. Your death would demoralize the *whole* nation."

“But you are *my* beacon of hope, Kaeya." Ajax grabs his shoulders and looks him in the eye. “I'll protect you just as much as I would my country."

Kaeya freezes, body going rigid with the feel of Ajax's hands burning into his skin through his uniform. Speechless, adrenaline coursing through his veins.

The archons cursed him with the ability to respond under fire, but not under… *this*.

“We've only met—"

A violent pounding against the door breaks Kaeya from his objection, causing the remaining resistance members to scurry along faster. Fear plagues their every move as Kaeya urges them to leave behind whatever they cannot carry and to flee with their lives. Ajax barricades himself against the door with all his body weight, and looks to the man, determined, ready to stand by his decision.

Kaeya huffs, thinking about his answer before joining Ajax, pressing his own back against the door.

“No one dies. Okay?" He whispers.

Ajax nods as their bodies jolt from the enemy still beating on the metal, demanding entrance. Discovery is imminent.

“No one."

Art by
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AKAIGU
TE
AT
TARTAGLIA

Of Family & Food

The sunrise in Liyue was nothing like the sunrise in Snezhnaya.

Childe made this observation as he leaned over the wooden railings lining the harbour's edge, elbows braced against them, staring out at the serene sea, only enhanced in beauty by the gleaming sunlight rippling the surface. In Snezhnaya, it would still be dark, but even when the sun rose, it was somewhat bleak. Still beautiful, but bleak. Snow glistened in place of the waves, and the mountains cast shadows over the land. It was cold, unforgiving, and familiar.

Here, people were already milling around, the markets opening for the day, sellers setting up their stalls, and fishermen making their first boat trips, humming happy tunes and joking with one another. Childe relished such moments, before he had to head to the bank, succumb to wasting away behind paper after boring paper, or before he set out on a day of hunting assigned targets. Today, though, he would be doing neither, which was why he spent a little longer admiring the seafront, and basking in the growing warmth of the morning.

No, today he would be taking a break. Doing a little shopping, enjoying a meal out, and perhaps he'd take a short hike when the sun began to set and the air began to cool. Even Harbingers needed some time to relax, he figured, and he only had a little paperwork left to finish. No one would miss him for a single day.

Joining the steady-moving stream of the morning crowd, Childe browsed the goods on sale with half-hearted interest, always carrying more than enough Mora to buy out the stock, yet with little need to do so, unless he was purchasing trinkets for his family back home, with accompanying gift wrapping and first-class postal stamps. He tried not to over-indulge in purchasing presents for his little siblings, lest he get swept away in the regular pangs of homesickness he felt even now, after years of being in the Fatui. A homebody like himself never truly cut that cord, reminiscing nightly the distinct flavours of his mother's cooking, the heavy footfall of his father on the creaky wooden stairs, the bubbling laughter from Teucer and Anthon when they acted out stories of knights and dragons for an applauding Tonia.

His fond recollection was interrupted as he nearly bumped into a woman. Bringing his hands up in an apologetic gesture, he stepped out of the way, but didn't miss the way her eyes narrowed as she skirted around him. He held back a sigh. Even now, months after the events of the Fatui's plotting in Liyue, Childe still noticed the dirty looks thrown his way, scathing and afraid, even as he simply browsed the stalls, or walked down the street, but he didn't blame the citizens. He would be wary of himself, too, if he was a layman going about his work.

There were a few folks, he'd discovered, who held little regard for his misdeeds, though. Some of the youngsters of the harbour, with less of an eye for danger and less will to hold a grudge, namely a certain trio, whose friendliness to him had not diminished. If anything, it seemed to have increased, perhaps out of pity or simple good will. Xiangling, the little creative chef; Xingqiu, the young Feiyun Commerce Guild's manager; and Chongyun, their dizzy yet well meaning exorcist friend. None of the three appeared to hold Childe's title or career against him, still waving hellos to him when they passed by, still chatting over books with him at the store, still serving him with a smile when he dined at Wanmin beneath the evening's lavender skies.

It was as the restaurant crossed his mind that he walked by it, and was drawn from his thoughts by a clamour inside the open-air kitchen. Pausing in his tracks, Childe leaned back to listen, picking up on the distinct distress present in a too-familiar mix of voices.

"I don't know, Xingqiu! He was totally fine last night…"

"Are you sure there's nothing that could've brought this on? Usually, sickness is either passed on, or environmental."

"Didn't you say the two of you went ingredient-collecting the other evening? It was pretty chilly, even by my standards."

"Oh, yeah! Dad waded in the water to get some lotus heads and horsetail, and it took us ages to get home. Now that you mention it, it was kinda cold."

Childe sidled towards the source of the voices, confirming that the very three he'd been expecting were grouped together, talking in a poorly attempted hush. Xiangling, Xingqiu, and Chongyun, looking varying levels of worried.

"Morning, you three!" He chirped, stifling a smile as Chongyun startled at his greeting, though his amusement soon melted away in the face of Xiangling's downcast expression. "Something the matter?"

"Good morning, Mr Childe." She said, with none of her usual pep, and he was reminded of when Tonia had a bad day at school, or struggled with a craft project. "If you're planning to stop by today, business might be slower than usual. My dad isn't so well; he's at home right now, so I'm in charge of Wanmin for the day."

Childe raised a brow. Usually, Xiangling seemed the type to be empowered by such a turn of events, independent and courageous, and always seeking opportunity to show off her skills, but she looked unnerved, and upset.

"Why, isn't this a good opportunity for you to experiment with some new recipes?" He asked, tilting his head in question, but she shook hers in return.

"It would be, any other day, but we have a huge reservation tonight. Ten sailors back from a big trip, their boss is paying for them all to eat and drink for the entire evening!" That usual sparkle returned to her eyes as she described such a prosperous business venture, but she soon reeled herself in again, face stony. "Dad expects a huge order. It'd have been a struggle with the two of us, but now it's just me! I don't think I can physically cook and serve that fast all alone."

Childe frowned, placing his hands on his hips and humming in thought, swaying from side to side in contemplation. He had wanted to take today off, but he was fond of Xiangling, in the way she reminded him strongly of his little sister back in Morepesok, the same burning ambition and bright mind, and what would Tonia think if she knew he left a struggling kid to fend for herself on such a high-pressure occasion?

"Need a pair of extra hands?" He offered, after little deliberation. "I just so happen to be off duty today. And, not to brag, but I'm quite the chef. Perhaps not as good as your father, but competent enough! At least, my Mama seems to think so."

Xiangling stared at him for a moment, eyes wide, before nodding with vigour, and beaming, all life returning to her.

"Oh! If you wouldn't mind, that'd be a huge help! I know everything that needs doing, trust me, I've had the prospective menu memorized for a month now, but without my dad, I was starting to panic a little. I can pay you back in meals on the house!"

Childe laughed good-naturedly.

"No need. Though… I do have a favour to ask."

* * *

Although the order was for that evening, Childe found himself put to work immediately.

Donned with one of Xiangling's spare aprons, and auburn hair clipped back per Wanmin's kitchen rules, he began to follow her instructions, rapid-fire and complex, but cheery now that she had his aid. First, tidying the chaos of the kitchen as she dished out normal orders up until noon. Childe swept the floors and wiped the surfaces, humming to himself as he got used to the flow of the workspace, and Xiangling skirted around him, arms stacked with platters of brunch foods and sweet-smelling soups, snacky pastries and simple bowls of rice, her cheeks ruddy from the heat of the stove, and with Guoba on her heels. Xiangling's boundless energy and bright smile reminded Childe strongly of Tonia; in fact, her entire attitude did, and he found himself missing home as he watched her deliver tea and appetizers to some storytellers on their break.

He'd often cooked with his mother back in Morepesok. What fond memories, before his enrollment to the Fatui, and even before his descent into the Abyss. Eight-year-old Childe, then Ajax, stood on his tip toes, peering over the counter, watching enraptured as his mother demonstrated her skills to him; chopping fresh vegetables from the market, kneading home-made bread dough, crushing garden-grown herbs with a pestle and mortar, all to make his childhood favourites, meals that would continue to comfort him as he grew up and grew out of that small fishing village.

Skills he had then taught his little brothers and sister when they had shown interest, a family tradition.

Childe snapped out of his head when he felt an inquisitive tap on his shoulder, and craned his neck to see Xiangling staring at him, brow furrowed in concern.

“You still with me, Mr Childe?" She asked, and Guoba made a grumbling noise, which tugged a smile out of the Harbinger, despite the ache in his chest as he recollected on the past, before his life became so solitary, so distant from his home and family.

“Present, chef." He said lightheartedly, and she laughed, but didn't abandon the issue, bracing her hands on her hips in determination as she looked at him expectantly. After a pause, he sighed, fiddling with the ties on his apron. “I was just thinking back to my time at home, when I used to cook with my siblings."

“You have siblings? Lucky! I always wanted a brother or sister."

“I am lucky." He agreed, smiling softly. “Though I don't get to see them too often now."

“What type of things did you cook with them?" Xiangling asked, curiosity piqued by the topic of food, as usual, and Childe was more than happy to share.

“Food in Snezhnaya is pretty different from Liyue." He began, staring out of the open-air kitchen at the cotton-cloud sky, dark eyes glazed over in thought. “It's cold there, so we eat a lot of stew and soup, stuff that keeps you toasty. My mother's soups are to die for. Her rassolnik and shchi especially - the strong flavours and fresh herbs from her wild garden are delicious."

“Fresh herbs really make a difference." Xiangling nodded in sage approval. “I've never heard of those dishes. What are they made with?"

Childe wasn't shy in sharing more, and found himself talking for far longer than was necessary or wise, considering the encroaching order upon their heads, but Xiangling had whipped out her pocket notebook, and was scribbling down his words fervently, eyes sparkling as he described the different types of shchi, sour and green, and about the preparation in his family home of rassolnik, the pickling of vegetables grown in the summer months to store throughout the other seasons, the haggling for their desired meat at the dawn and midday markets. She wrote down the recipes, but paused when he spoke of home, and simply listened with small nods and an understanding smile.

“Y'know,” she said, when he finally dwindled in his rambling, “it sounds like you really miss your family.”

Silence stretched between them for a long moment, the sounds of the harbour a distant buffer, the waves lapping up against the stone walls comforting. “I do.” Childe said eventually. Another pause. “It's nice to spend some time doing these things again. Cooking and talking, instead of working.”

“I'm glad, then!” Xiangling said, “Cooking makes me happy, too. I was so disappointed when I found out I was gonna be all alone today. Chongyun and Xingqiu are disasters in the kitchen, so that was a no-go. It's a good thing you walked by when you did.”

Childe chuckled lightly, resuming his task of washing the dishes as she began to collect ingredients on the counters for their big order. The sun dwindled high in the sky, noon soon to be over, which meant the evening was approaching, and they had a lot to do.

“Give me the details of tonight's patrons once more, would you?” He said, finally moving on from the topic of family and the yearning for home. “I think I have an idea.”

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The kitchen smelt divine, like fish and herbs and melting butter, a homely and warming scent, yet fresh like the ocean; the perfect combination for a mild evening at the harbour.

Xiangling had told Childe of their customers, and the Harbinger had put forth a plan to go alongside her prospective menu. A variety of buffet-style courses revolving around the sailors' scene, the sea and fishing, complimented with Liyue's local specialties, and with Xiangling's classic kick of ground Jeuyun chilies, a signature of many of her dishes. And, best of all, she was enthusiastic about his personal favourite dish to cook - *'a Prize Catch'*, as he called it - and didn't turn her nose up in disgust at the crimson soup filled with fresh seafood. In fact, she nodded vigorously, and had him write down the recipe for her future reference.

Childe never thought he could have such fun gutting a fish, but with company as bright as this, it was hard to find even that disheartening. Xiangling chattered away as she drizzled oil and herbs into a frying pan, and Childe responded in tandem with laughs and hums where suitable. The scales of the fish peeled away easily, the knife ran clean, and he trashed the hygiene gloves she'd given him once finished, clearing his hands of blood for perhaps the first time in his life.

Once the sailors arrived, serving was a breeze, far easier than he had expected. The men and their boss were amicable and boisterous, and thanked Xiangling profusely each time she dashed outside to lay down more dishes before them, on their large table composed of many smaller ones pushed together. Their boss was the most jovial of them all, ordering rounds of beer to go with each course, and Childe could see the way the young chef glowed before all the praise, and all the good news she could later deliver to her father.

Childe found himself preening almost as much as Xiangling when the boss clapped him on the shoulder, grabbing his soup-spoon and chopsticks with enthusiasm as Childe served up his signature dish. He never knew how it would be received; most people were easily off-put by such a cacophony of seafood and ingredients, but these men were used to the ocean, and polished off each plate with hearty appetites and compliments.

The din of the customers faded after the moon rose and they dismissed themselves, leaving a bountiful check and a bag of tips for both their servers as Wanmin finally closed. Childe didn't need the money, so he passed his share to Xiangling insistently, even when she shook her head and frowned at him.

"I'm a Harbinger, Xiangling. I don't have a need for more Mora."

"Hmm… if you say so." She grumbled, taking the tip from him and pocketing it along with her own. As they cleaned the kitchen in a rare quiet harmony, Xiangling disappeared into the indoors storage of Wanmin, returning a few moments later with her arms full of wrapped foods.

Non-perishables, specifically. Bags full of hard-candy, in flavours based on Liyue specialties, silk-flowers and glaze-lilies, were dropped onto the counters before Childe, and he grinned.

"The favour you asked for." She confirmed, gesturing to all the confectioneries. "Local food that can withstand a long journey. I hope it's to your liking!"

"Very much so." He said happily. "I wanted a good gift for my family. My little siblings will love these, and I'm sure Mama and Papa will too, even if they haven't got as much of a sweet tooth. Thank you, Xiangling. I'll send a package of it along with my next letter home."

"Nah, don't mention it. I should be the one thanking you." She said, Guoba nodding along to her words from where he stood by her feet. "You really helped me out today, Mr Childe, and my dad too. We won't soon forget your kindness! Even if people in the Harbour haven't fully forgiven you yet, I think you're a nice person, and definitely a good big brother."

Childe stared at her in surprise for a moment, before turning away with a bashful smile, for once at a loss for words. She really did remind him of Tonia, in the way she spread positivity and brightened the days of those around her.

"Thanks, Xiangling. I'll be around for a meal sometime this week, once Chef Mao is back on his feet."

"You'd better!" She beamed as she ushered him out of the kitchen, clearly eager to get home and tell her father how the day went. "Good work today, Mr Childe."

"You too." He concluded the day with a wave and to both Xiangling and the little bear by her side, before turning on his heel, bag of candy slung over his arm, pocketing his hands, and whistling an improvised tune as he began the walk back to his accommodations.

The sunrise in Liyue was nothing like the sunrise in Snezhnaya. Neither was the food, nor the culture. But the serenity of a domestic day, of cooking with good friends and thinking of his beloved family, couldn't be more similar.

Tartaglia- Bloodhunter of the Profane Soul

Medium humanoid, chaotic neutral

Armor Class 14 (leather armor)
Hit Points 55 (10d8 + 10)
Speed 30 ft.

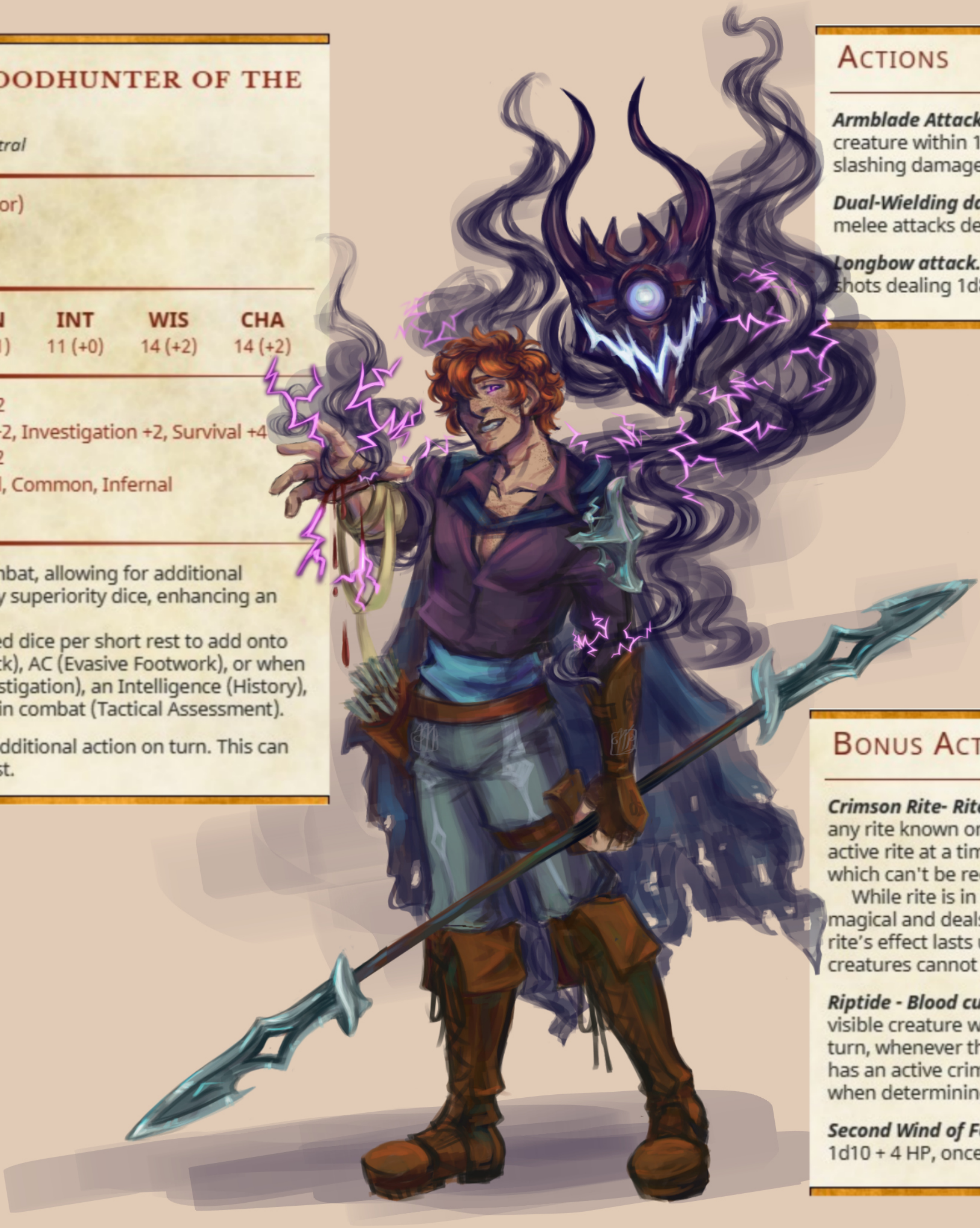
STR	DEX	CON	INT	WIS	CHA
12 (+1)	16 (+3)	13 (+1)	11 (+0)	14 (+2)	14 (+2)

Saving Throws Dex +5, Int +2
Skills Acrobatics +5, Arcana +2, Investigation +2, Survival +4
Senses passive Perception 12
Languages Abyssal, Celestial, Common, Infernal
Challenge 4 (1,100 XP)

Battle Master. Master of combat, allowing for additional maneuvers that are fueled by superiority dice, enhancing an attack in some way.

4d8 superiority can be used dice per short rest to add onto an attack roll (Precision Attack), AC (Evasive Footwork), or when making an Intelligence (Investigation), an Intelligence (History), or a Wisdom (Insight) check in combat (Tactical Assessment).

Action Surge. Can take one additional action on turn. This can be used 1 times per short rest.



Actions

Armblade Attack. Can make a melee attack against any creature within 10 feet if wielding lance, dealing 1d12+2 slashing damage.

Dual-Wielding daggers. Uses two long daggers to make two melee attacks dealing 1d4+3 piercing damage each.

Longbow attack. Range: 150 ft. Can make up to 3 consecutive shots dealing 1d8+3 piercing damage.

Bonus Actions

Crimson Rite- Rite of the Storm. As a bonus action can activate any rite known on a held weapon. A weapon can only hold one active rite at a time. When activated, takes 1d6 necrotic damage which can't be reduced in any way.

While rite is in effect, attacks made with this weapon are magical and deals an additional 1d6 lightning damage. The rite's effect lasts until a completed short/long rest and other creatures cannot gain the benefit of the rite.

Riptide - Blood curse of The Marked. As a bonus action, marks a visible creature within a range of 30 feet. Until the end of the turn, whenever the cursed creature is hit with a weapon that has an active crimson rite, roll an additional hemocraft die (1d6) when determining the extra damage from the rite.

Second Wind of Foul Legacy. Can use a bonus action to regain 1d10 + 4 HP, once per long rest.

Distant Shorelines

Generally, he doesn't like using claymores and other large two-handed swords. They're cumbersome and heavy, and his strikes with them, while more powerful, are slower and cause him to have vulnerable spots open longer. It's agitating to have to tug the sword through the air, instead of being able to quickly slice through it.

Some people have told him that his fighting reminds them of dancing: fast and graceful with a certain rhythm behind his motions. He doesn't lie and claim that he doesn't twirl his blades with some of the same techniques as Snezhnayan sword dancers or that he doesn't keep his steps light like a ballerino. At the same time, he doesn't confirm it, either. He always laughs them off and says something about how combat itself is an art.

Claymores are not easily twirled, and his steps have to be forceful in order to throw his weight for strength in his strikes. That is not to say that he isn't incredibly skilled with such blades, however. After all, he's Tartaglia: vanguard of the Fatui Harbingers and master of weaponry. He can use a claymore like he was born wielding one.

As with any skill, it requires upkeep, and that is why he is here now on Fatui training grounds with a claymore in his hands- even though he'd really prefer to be continuing his archery practice. When he first walked into the area, it was relatively full of other soldiers, but as they came to realize his presence among them, it cleared out. He didn't issue an order for the training grounds to empty, so he's not sure why they all left. Maybe it was out of respect, leaving before they could bother him or get in his way. Or maybe it was because they were afraid he'd use one of them as a training target.

...which wasn't an outrageous possibility. He trains by himself often, and he came to the grounds this time out of hopes to find someone to at least spar with. With that now out of the picture and having spent the past half an hour on basic drills, he's starting to get bored. An ache in his muscles has set in from lugging around the steel claymore, and he knows if he destroys any more training dummies and targets he'll have to pay for new ones out of his own pocket. There isn't much point to continuing this.

He sighs and sets down the claymore. There's paperwork back in one of this base's offices waiting for him- paperwork he's loath to do. It's a request from Pantalone and his team, something about them wanting him to kill a creature that a noble is offering to pay a pretty sum to the Fatui for its pelt. He'll agree to it, of course. The Tsarista's weapon, out to loan to her other possessions. It's nothing out of the ordinary.

Eventually, he will be powerful enough to be both the weapon and the wielder. His goal is a lofty one, but he can achieve it. Fighting is what he was born for. Fate itself decreed that he was meant to be a tool to deliver war, and he has no qualms or grievances about it. He's grateful to have fallen into the Abyss, to have been able to find a means to unlock his true potential and set him onto the path to greatness. Due to his fighting, his role as a warrior, his life has purpose and meaning. He has no regrets, and he's happy with how things are coming along.

If he repeats these things often enough, he'll one day fully believe them.

He wonders how his siblings are doing. Lately Tonia has been more reserved in her letters, basic reports on how the rest of the family is doing and how her schoolwork is coming along rather than passionate opinions and gossipy accounts of her friends and their neighbors. She doesn't tease him as much in the letters anymore, either. With her growing older, he recognizes that she's likely becoming more aware of the gap between them and their lives- the teenager who collects pretty hair ribbons, and one of the most powerful people in Snezhnaya who is infamously bloodthirsty for battle.

For years, he's been the closest with her out of his family. Anthon and Teucer don't write to him, despite being fully capable of doing so, for reasons he's not quite sure of. His older siblings like to pretend that he does not exist most of the time. He dreads the day that Tonia's letters stop arriving. Perhaps he's a pessimist for predicting that that will happen, but he thinks more so that he is being realistic. Nothing lasts forever, and that includes his role as a beloved big brother, as much as he wishes to hold onto it.

Sunlight peeks out from behind fluffy clouds and slowly warms his back, a gentle reminder along with the crushed green grass beneath his feet that he's far from ice-riddled Snezhnaya. He concentrates for a second, and a blade made of gleaming Hydro materializes in his hands, a water copy of the claymore he set down. In Snezhnaya, he'd have to be careful about his Hydro use, with how easily things freeze. Here, he doesn't have to worry about anything freezing, and he has more freedom to be creative and fully extend his abilities.

Most of the time, he much prefers the weapons he forges himself out of Hydro compared to their solid counterparts. He can shift between different weaponry seamlessly, adjusting to whatever is needed for an optimal attack or defense maneuver in battle. It feels more like an extension of himself, as if he is putting his own soul into what he uses to create bloodshed, no separation from him and tool. There's a limit to what he can achieve with only his body, and he delights in being able to surpass it with his weaponry.

He grins and swings the Hydro claymore back and forth a couple times. A rush of water splashes out violently from the action, beheading a nearby training dummy. That makes him pause, and note that he really should not destroy any more. In only the passing of a second, he shifts the claymore into a bow, and fires an arrow, aiming to hit the fallen head of the training dummy. It's a miss; the arrow splashes down an inch away from its intended target.

With a small huff of annoyance, he aims again, more carefully this time. The arrow flies, and lands even further away from the training dummy than before. His grin disappears, and he tosses the bow up into the sky and reshapes it and reforms it and adds an immense amount of Hydro until it resembles a narwhal that's larger than a carriage. He waves his arm in a flourish, and the whale elegantly jumps, showing the clouds its belly, before landing with a giant splash onto the ground below. It does a noticeable bit of damage: the dummy is now completely obliterated, and the training grounds as a whole are entirely soaked.

“Whoa,” someone says quietly, almost inaudible.

Tartaglia sharply turns, looking for the intruder. He summons new Hydro blades in his hands, ready to defend upon attack. “Who's there? Show yourself!"

An unfamiliar figure emerges from behind a nearby tent, her movements shaky. Her attire makes her recognizable as a Cicin Mage, and she clutches her hands close to her chest as she approaches. “I sincerely apologize, Lord Harbinger, I wasn't trying to spy or anything, I was told to come to the training grounds earlier but I got lost and I know I should have left when I saw that it was just you here but I saw the Hydro animal and it was so mesmerizing and I'm so, so sorry for my rudeness,” she answers in a quick burst of words.

He blinks, and dissolves his blades, feeling a little bad about how scared she is. “It's alright, you're not in trouble. You liked the whale?" Tartaglia can't help but perk up at her calling it ‘mesmerizing’- he's proud of his constructs.

Some of the tension leaves the mage's shoulders, though she still anxiously shifts her weight from foot to foot. “Yes, it was very impressive, Lord Tartaglia. I, um, didn't know whales could have horns- I've seen your insignia, with the whale, but I thought the horn was, um, an artistic choice."

"Most whales don't have them. That specific whale is what is called a narwhal. The horn is actually a type of tooth, or tusk, not a real horn," he informs her, barely holding himself back from going into detail about the usage of the tusk, as he doubts she will have much interest in that.

The mage stares at him, her fidgeting stopped. Her gaze is unreadable, making him wonder if he said something wrong.

After a moment, she shakes her head. "My apologies, Lord Tartaglia. You reminded me of someone, for a moment there. It caught me off guard," the mage says. "That's really interesting, a tusk! Wow."

While Tartaglia wholeheartedly agrees that it is interesting, that opinion is not what catches his attention. "Who did I remind you of?" He asks, curious.

"My little sister," she says, then waves her hands frantically in dismissal. "Not in a bad way, I do not mean any offense! She's around your age, maybe a bit older, and she's always telling me all sorts of things about the sea."

The answer is so far from what he expected that for a second, he is at a loss for what to say. While he is one of the more well-liked Harbingers, he still is rarely treated with casualness among subordinates and lower ranked Fatui. They don't tell him about their personal lives, they don't ask him about his. They certainly do not compare him to their family members, and while he has seen his siblings in others(that rock musician from Liyue definitely carried the same enthusiasm and friendliness that his own little sister has), he never thought that the reverse would occur for him.

"Is she a fisherman?" Is what he manages to respond with, trying to regain his footing in the conversation. He doesn't need some random mage thinking that something is off with him, and spreading that to others. His reputation is pretty important to keep if he wants anyone to listen to his orders.

The mage shakes her head again. "No, she's a marine researcher. Right now she's apprenticing in the big city. I can't wait to write her about your whale- um, if that is acceptable, Lord Tartaglia?"

He thinks about a certain book that is at his parents' house, full of detailed illustrations of fish, the pages worn from how many times small hands have flipped through them. "Impressive," Tartaglia says, meaning it. "And I don't mind. Would you like to see some other animals? You can tell your supervisor you were helping me with something."

"I would love to!" The mage exclaims loudly. She looks around them, and lowers her voice. "Thank you."

Tartaglia should be going back to filling out that paperwork, not showing off his constructs to a random subordinate, but he already is swirling Hydro in the space around them, shaping it into a seal. The seal is pudgy and round with big eyes, and once it is fully formed, the seal speedily swims through the air, twirling and propelling itself with each change of direction. It lands down on the ground in front of the mage, its neck stretching as it peers at her.

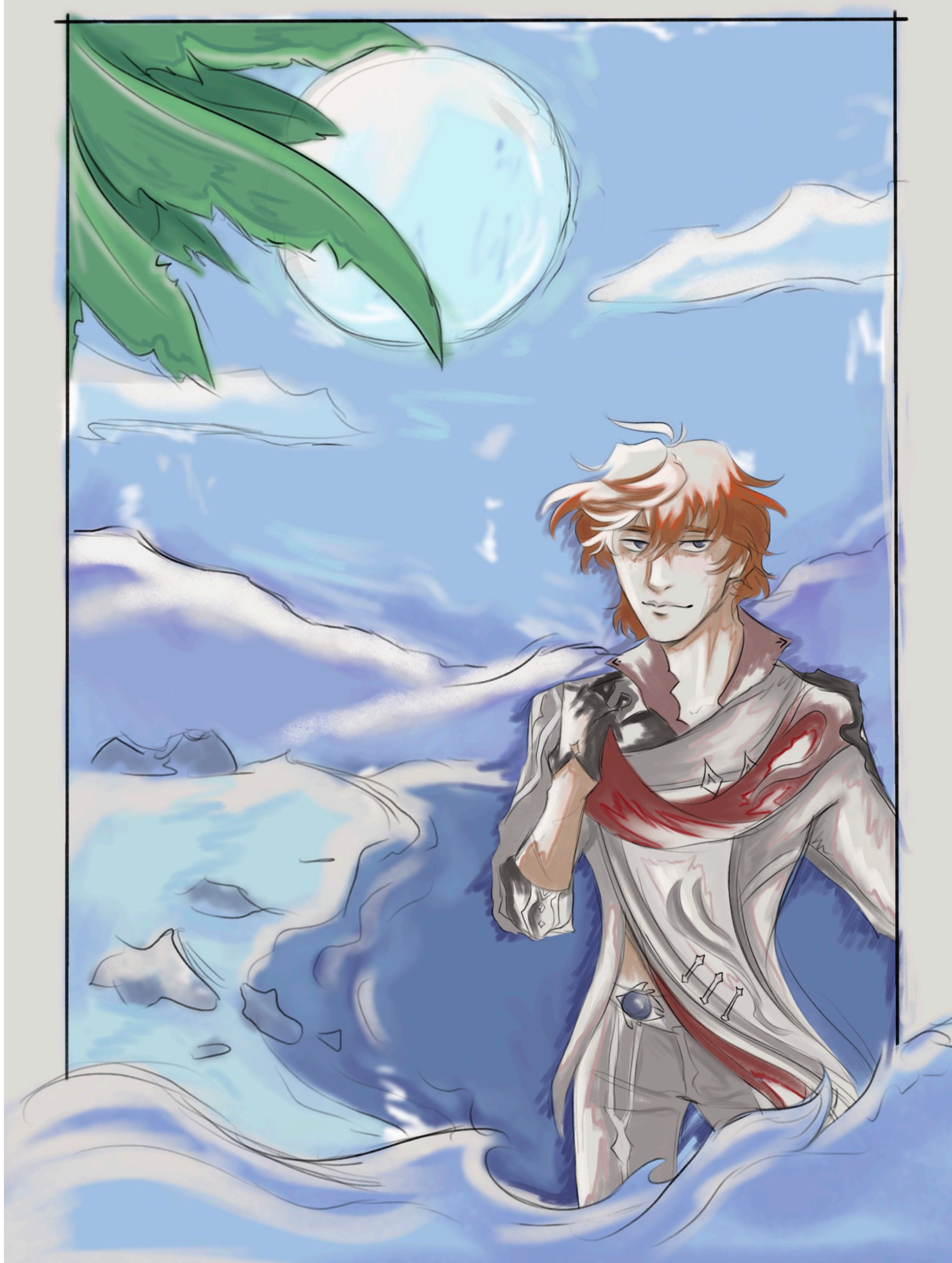
A moment passes, and it leaps up into the sky, the head elongating into a point as the tail and flippers turn into thin, long arms and tentacles. The seal, now a large squid, moves as if it is performing a dance, swaying in a mesmerizing manner. Abruptly, it pulls apart into what becomes a dozen little jellyfish, and they float down around Tartaglia and the mage, glowing softly with the magic of Hydro.

The mage reaches out with a finger and pokes at one of the jellyfish, jumping a bit when her finger goes through it. “Amazing,” she whispers. She looks up at him, and frowns. “Are you alright?”

A jellyfish floats into Tartaglia's shoulder, then bumbles away. He realizes that he had accidentally let his expression become blank, and he quickly rearranges it into a friendly grin. “I have to get back to my own work,” he says, though it is not work he is thinking of- he now has the want to ask Tonia what their older siblings are up to. He won't, though.

“Of course, my lord,” the mage says, and does a stiff bow. “Again, I am grateful for what you have shown me.”

“It's just water,” Tartaglia replies. The jellyfish splash to the ground, no longer lovingly crafted recreations of creatures, instead reduced to water that is only making the soil muddy. He moves to leave, not looking back at the mage, and wishes he was at a home that never was.



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Not As I Do

"It's warm for the season," Ajax says.

A neighbor of his, whose name escapes him, nods.

"Uncomfortably so."

Ajax rubs the underside of his nose raw until his mucus dries. His gloves are worn as the skin beneath. With a shake of his wrist, his sweat and tears water his family's *kurgan*. It's a sizable mound of dirt for how many people are buried under it; five siblings and his folks find their rest there.

Life leaving his parents' ashes must be the chill that meets the sunlight to make fog today, he thinks. Clouds rolling over the hillside must be their final breaths.

Clouds could also be dust. He moved a lot of rocks building the tomb.

Ajax drops his tools and shakes out his hands.

“Looks good,” Tonia says. She appears beside him with her hands behind her back. Before, she would have tackled him, and Teucer would have tackled her.

Ajax combs his fingers through her hair. He tucks one finger into a knot in her braid to fix her flyaways. She flinches at his touch. It breaks his heart, but he tries to be compassionate. She's put herself together well today. Were she not dressed in their eldest sister's clothing he'd be proud of how well she cleaned up.

“So do you,” he tells her.

“Thank you.” She nudges him with her elbow. “You look like shit.”

Ajax catches himself exhaling a laugh through his nose for the first time in days.

“I'll think of something,” he says, apropos of nothing. The words are for himself. “I'll think of something,” he repeats.

In the distance—northeast, from the river—shadows strike against sunrise.

Ajax expected this following the attack on their territory—they took out the head of Ajax's family and the next three in line.

Every tribe in Snezhnaya has spilled blood. No ancestry is innocent. It's exhausting, though, that a fresh dynasty of filth in Snezhnaya thinks themselves entitled to Morepesok. His family establishing diplomacy in Morepesok hasn't been enough, it seems, to keep bastards at bay.

Twenty of them arrive by boat from north and east with the nerve to greet the current head in his very own court.

The man leading the herd is smaller than Tonia and calls himself *Rooster*. Armed soldiers surround his negotiators and ruffle the feathers on the old man's collar. Rooster sours upon meeting Ajax, makes no secret of his displeasure. Deep wrinkles shape Rooster's face.

What an appropriate name for a cock, Ajax thinks.

They spare each other pleasantries. No facade could disguise this unwelcome intrusion.

“With the head and heirs slain, we suggest that the inheritor of Morepesok marry our Captain,” Rooster says.

The *suggestion* is not an unreasonable one. This *is* the outcome Rooster's tribe sought, though Ajax doubts they expected multiple survivors.

He says, "You want him to wed *me*?"

Rooster clears his throat. "We meant to imply the *female* inheritor."

"I don't see why that's necessary when I'm perfectly eligible."

"Let us call it *assurance* for the fertility and prosperity of the lands we share, that we hope belongs to *all* of us in the future."

Ajax's toes curl in his boots. His fingers twitch at his sides.

“Your father was a bit of a wolf, wasn't he?" Rooster asks. “Crafty and ravening. He did instigate the conflict, you know. Our Captain only retaliated to preserve our territory."

Many things could be said about Ajax's late father. Few of them would be positive. Even with that, Father wasn't the type to initiate armed conflicts.

Ajax clears his throat a little louder than Rooster had. He covers his mouth and relaxes his posture. "If that's the case, your offer is surely tempting. I must have Morepesok welcome you properly. Peaceful tidings are fragile things."

Rooster looks to his cohorts. They pass nods among themselves.

“On the morrow, then?" Rooster clarifies.

Ajax nods. “On the morrow."

Upon their dismissal, Ajax rallies the strongest his city has to offer. He barks a command to all those in earshot. In their meeting hall, in the fortification on the outskirts of their capital, a ditch should be dug. From there, trenches. They should be deeper than the head is high, and they should be reinforced with stone.

Men toil through the night and bicker like idle wives while Ajax dotes on Tonia. He makes their meal for two and serves her personally for a change.

Outside are complaints about him treating the villagers like servants that night, and Ajax tolerates it on Tonia's behalf. This is an occasion she does not need to partake in.

When Rooster arrives to the court as intended, he and his nineteen others are dumped to the pits. The walls are too damp to find hold on. They have no need to escape when they've landed so comfortably on their asses.

They curse Ajax with words he can barely make out from his perch. He doesn't need to know their dialect to get the message: Ajax, they cry, is without a semblance of pride to him.

He grins from ear-to-ear when he kicks a rock into the pit and it strikes one of the men below. It's a shame it hits him in the face instead of somewhere less appropriate. He props a foot upon a pile of dirt much like the *kurgan* his family sleeps inside now. This one is smaller.

“Tell me," Ajax goes, “how have you found my honor?"
Rooster glares at him from behind his own men toppled over each other. “Worse than your parents and each of your siblings."

Ajax finds himself smiling. A novel thing.

He orders that the men should be buried alive, and thus they are buried.

Soon after, he sends a message north to the *Captain*.

It would be foolish to expect a positive response. For himself and those closest to him—those precious few, one or two, remaining—he speaks in half-truths.

If Captain's request for Tonia's presence was so damn important, he would have sent a reflection of that intent. A band of weak men does not a convincing proposal make, and so *their* band she will not yet wear.

Word travels fast. "It's a nuisance," a farmer complains of it. "Got better things to do than worry about Snezhnayans over there."

While tending to livestock, the man thinks aloud and his children patter about chasing fowl. Ajax feeds the birds for him. It's nostalgic.

"They aren't part of quite Snezhnaya yet," Ajax reminds him.

There is a risk to war with larger tribes like those to the north and east. Losing land is easier than losing lives, but the cost is higher when Morepesok is sparsely populated.

The farmer drops a sack by Ajax's feet. "None of them are welcome. Doesn't matter what they call themselves."

If they call themselves anything, it better be *distinguished*. Anything less will not do for Tonia.

Yet the group of *distinguished folk* that comes carries no one of note. Their leader is long and lean and terribly smug, as if he's told a joke that no one else understands. Ajax would end him on the spot, if he could. Instead he offers peace that Snezhnaya did not—a bath, first, and then a meal.

The visitors convene for a soak in the heated bathhouse. Ajax locks the building from the outside, lest his anyone intrude on their *distinguished* company.

Were Mother alive, they may have received her renowned hospitality. But Mother is dead, as are her children that inherited those skills from her. Ajax never quite got it. Tonia was never interested. What a shame.

Ajax sets the bathhouse doors ablaze. The wooden building burns with the men inside. If they scream, he does not hear it. If they pound on the walls, well, that's a pity for their knuckles.

He sends to the tribe once more and thanks them for their company. Rooster and the one called *Regrator* are traveling the hills with Morepesok's own diplomats. They came unprepared for his family's funeral. There should be mead brought by Captain's soldiers, so that Tonia may mourn her losses properly before being wed.

At this, Morepesok becomes an uproar Ajax quiets with a frigid fist.

Tonia pulls him aside to ask, "Am I going with them when they leave?" She tugs her lower lip between her teeth. Fidgets with the hem of her sleeve.

Whatever answer he provides is a lie. Tonia is wise enough to say nothing of it.

Tens or hundreds come to Morepesok to celebrate their victory. Enemy soldiers eat the fruits of Morepesok's labor and drink from cups crafted by Morepesok's artisans. They partake in idle chatter across too-long tables. Behind each of them is someone who calls Morepesok home waiting for their turn to eat.

Ajax sits atop the tomb he built himself with Tonia close beside. It's comforting to think their loved ones are within arm's reach, if only they could stretch through stone.

The hunger clawing at him is something foreign and cruel. His stomach is quivering. He thinks he is starving.

He will ensure that Tonia remains fed.

Tonia eats with her head down. She drinks mead until her cheeks are pink. Ale is a gloss on her lips that the wrong people could misunderstand as lust, and her cadence is airy while she spreads laughter with those who expect to take her as a trophy. Each man who approaches receives a refill on mead and merriment.

Another, another. Until *each man* from Northeast who steps any which way is stumbling. Ajax helps Tonia to evade their questions and suggests they drink more.

“It is a funeral,” he says. “It is a celebration.”

Another, another. Until beverage flows as blood from foaming mouths and slit throats.

Heads are ripped from swollen necks. Bloated stomachs do not flatten when they fall. Limbs lie bent and broken and Morepesok's soldiers toss them to piles.

Ajax snatches the bottle of mead nearest Tonia. He grins like he hasn't in however long and misses his mouth when he tries to drink.

Another, another. Until the executions are complete.

Ajax dines beside a tower of corpses awaiting the flame. He tears at cooked fowl with his teeth and savors it the way he will never the taste of death. The others make haste in taking their fill, assuring him their appetites are healthy in ways their adversaries are not.

Jokes are pressed at the expense of the dead throughout the meal. Those who carry the bodies seem lighter now. Their efforts, they are sure, are not in vain.

What of that vanity, Ajax wonders, when it is Tonia who lights the pyre for those who would steal her?

Ajax nearly vomits. If he concentrates on charcoal and woodsmoke, he can ignore the stench of bloodshed.

Once, a craftsman tells Ajax, “It's not enough,” and Ajax finds himself agreeing.

And so forward, he encourages Morepesok's soldiers. Up and to the right on the map. The offensive is slow and methodical, unlike the man behind its commands. Ajax was quick to make preparations and quicker to act on them.

He lays waste between themselves and those who would steal Tonia from him. With his guidance they target chokepoints, isolating each village from its neighbor. If the people are not massacred, they are starved of resources. It's an appropriate punishment for the actions of their so-called Captain.

Ajax is on the frontlines of the siege. His word is law on the field. He makes demands of his men and of those they occupy that become increasingly obscene. There are innocent people, there, as he is often reminded, but he knows better than to assume the best of them.

It is not until after he has ravaged the land that he feels safe to return to Morepesok. Then and only then does he appoint someone else to lead.

When he returns, Tonia does not meet his gaze.

She asks, “Is this necessary?”

He wants to say it is.

She tugs her cloak over, covering her neck and collar. The skin there looks dry. Her hands, too. Ajax wonders how many months have passed, and when Tonia started looking like their mother.

“Our own resources are spread thinner the longer we hold this out,” she reminds him.

A year, his mind then supplies. That is how long it has been since the initial attack. Morepesok is a year into sieging the territories to the north and east. Ajax bathes in the blood of dozens, hundreds, *thousands* of people. What rest he gets is anything but; he closes his eyes to never sleep. He reasons that Tonia must be aging, though Ajax can’t help thinking he is aging faster.

That’s alright. It is well worth the effort. With the enemy long on their backfoot, Morepesok is at an advantage.

He remembers encountering *Dottore* shortly after the initial invasion; a would-be healer speaking on behalf of the Captain. His teeth were razors—he and Ajax had that in common. But Ajax had no intention of reaching mutual understanding with him. Their meeting was already an act of generosity.

Ajax had asked him, “Why do you insist on holding out?” and Dottore spat in his face. He said, “Every city has surrendered and submitted tribute. The inhabitants have returned to their fields in peace.”

Dottore had claimed they “would have no trouble submitting tribute were *someone* not bent on their vengeance.”

Ajax waved him off, then, and assured Dottore he’d “avenged my family thrice. I want nothing but to make peace and go home.”

Now, when sending for the illustrious *Capitano*, so his name apparently is, Ajax is confident that they will choose to surrender.

One more time, he dangles the promise of Tonia’s hand. She may be wed to their Captain, Ajax offers, but Morepesok will become the leader of their agreement.

When Tonia finds out, she slams her fists into her brother’s chest. She screams and cries and refuses all she’d like. But as before, he cannot tell her his intentions. The more she knows, the more vulnerable she is, and the more liable she is for his actions. That’s a responsibility he will never set on her shoulders, so long as he can avoid it.

She’s infuriated further when all Ajax asks for as tribute are three birds from each family—fowl and pigeons.

“What have we been avoiding if this was going to be the end result?” she asks.

It’s a fair question. One he has no answer for. This *was* going to be the end result so long as their family members stayed dead. Unless they miraculously revived themselves one day, this was inevitable.

It follows, then, that the *inevitable* solution is his idea.

Birds cluck and traipse about their fertile fields, pecking at this and that. They’re cute. Obnoxious. Their village has neither the room nor resources to feed all of them right now, unfortunately, but if they did they might keep a few around.

Through the evening, Ajax and his company tie little cloth packets to the feet of the birds and send them on their merry way home, trusting the birds to find their way as any human might with the stars.

It is after dark when the birds return to their coops and pens, up the river where they belong.

Ajax approaches one of the birds he thinks he prepared himself and pats the sleeping pigeon's feathers. It ruffles a bit and for a moment Ajax considers changing his mind.

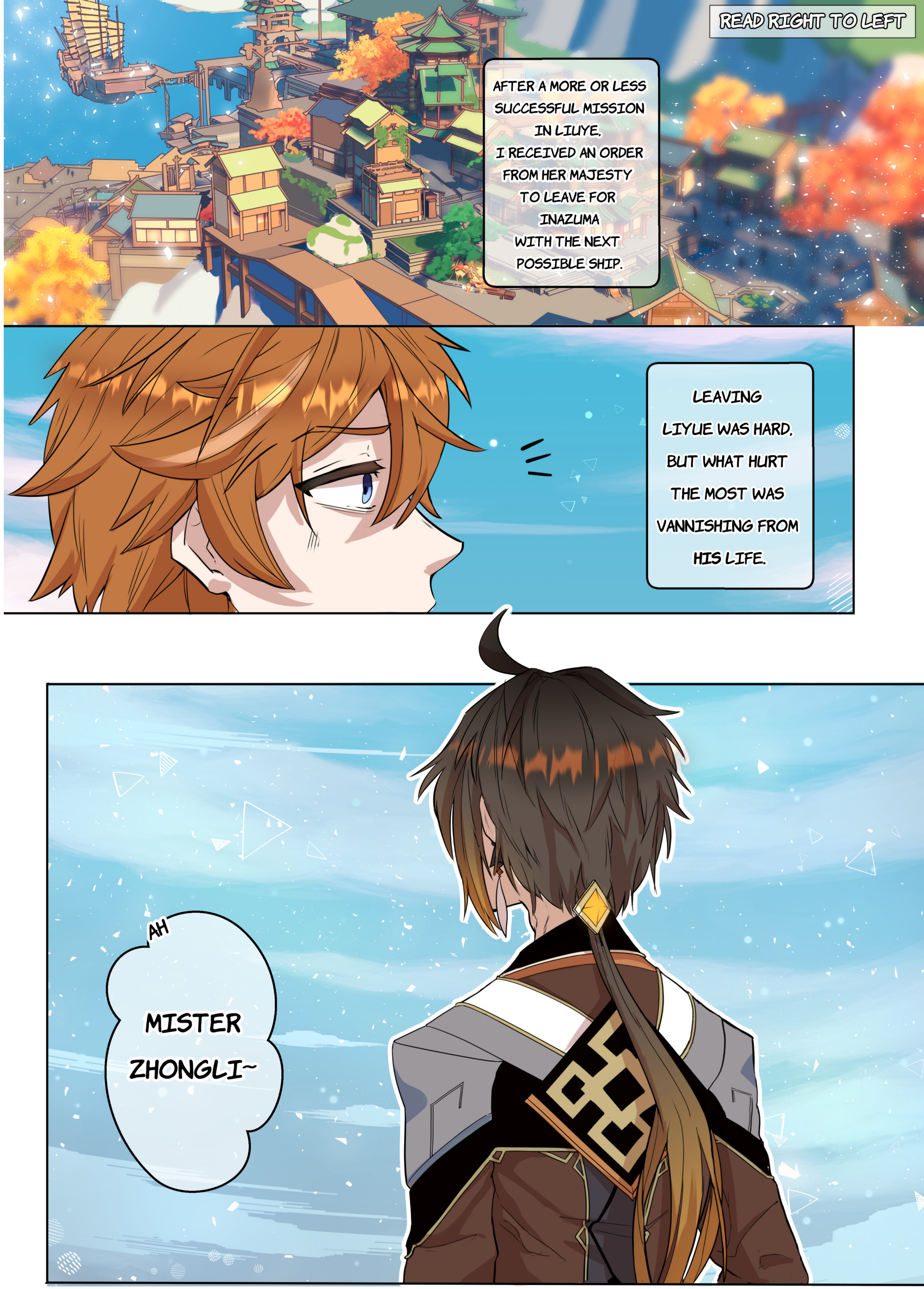
It is but a moment.

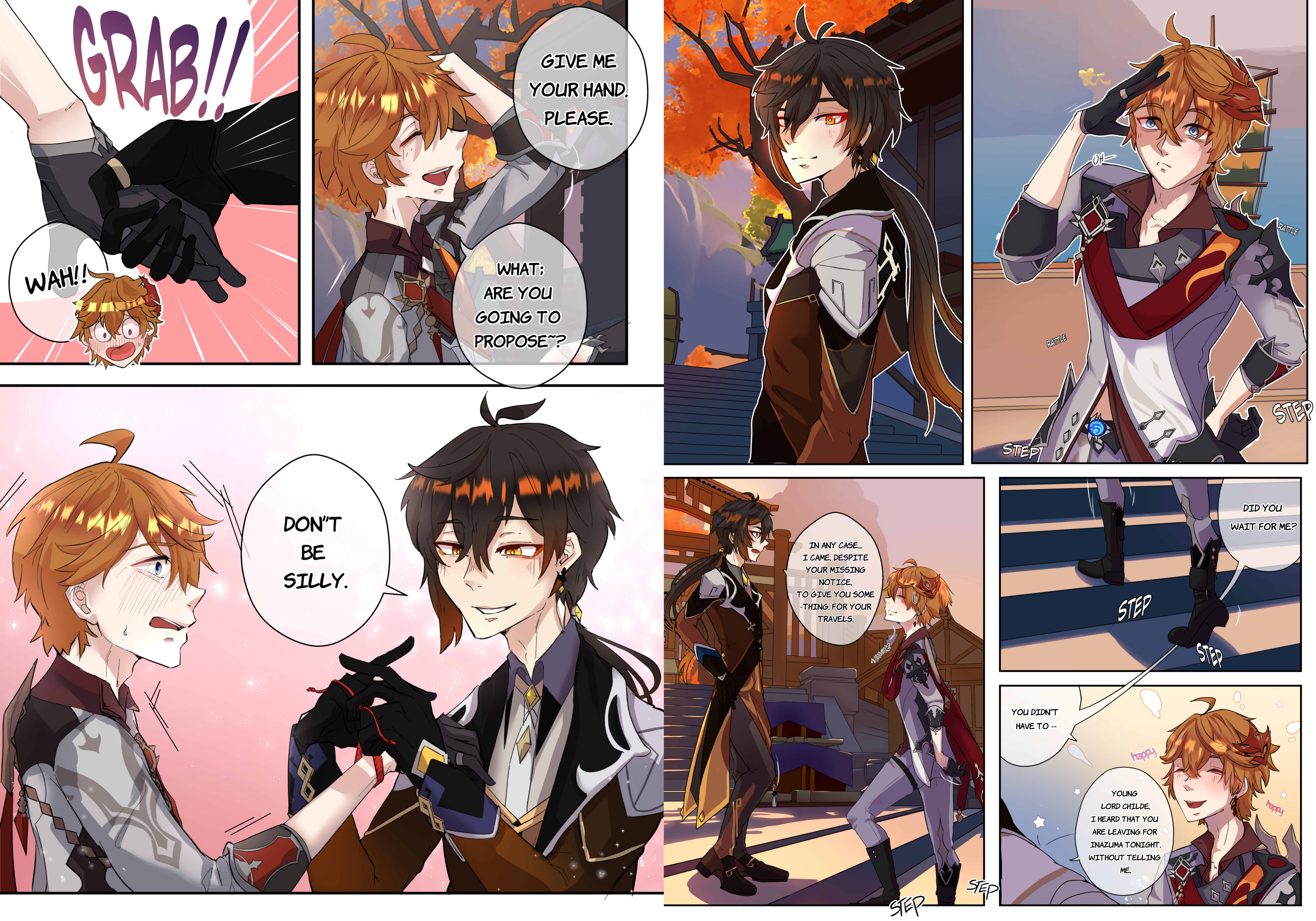
He smells smoke before he sees it. With a huff and a steady hand, he lights a long string attached to the fabric pouch at the bird's foot. The long wick of string fizzles slowly. Tension knots in his stomach as he hopes the wet ground doesn't dampen the slowly-sizzling flame. It chases up the thread, burning it away, and as it grows too close, Ajax slips away into the night. His collaborators follow close behind.

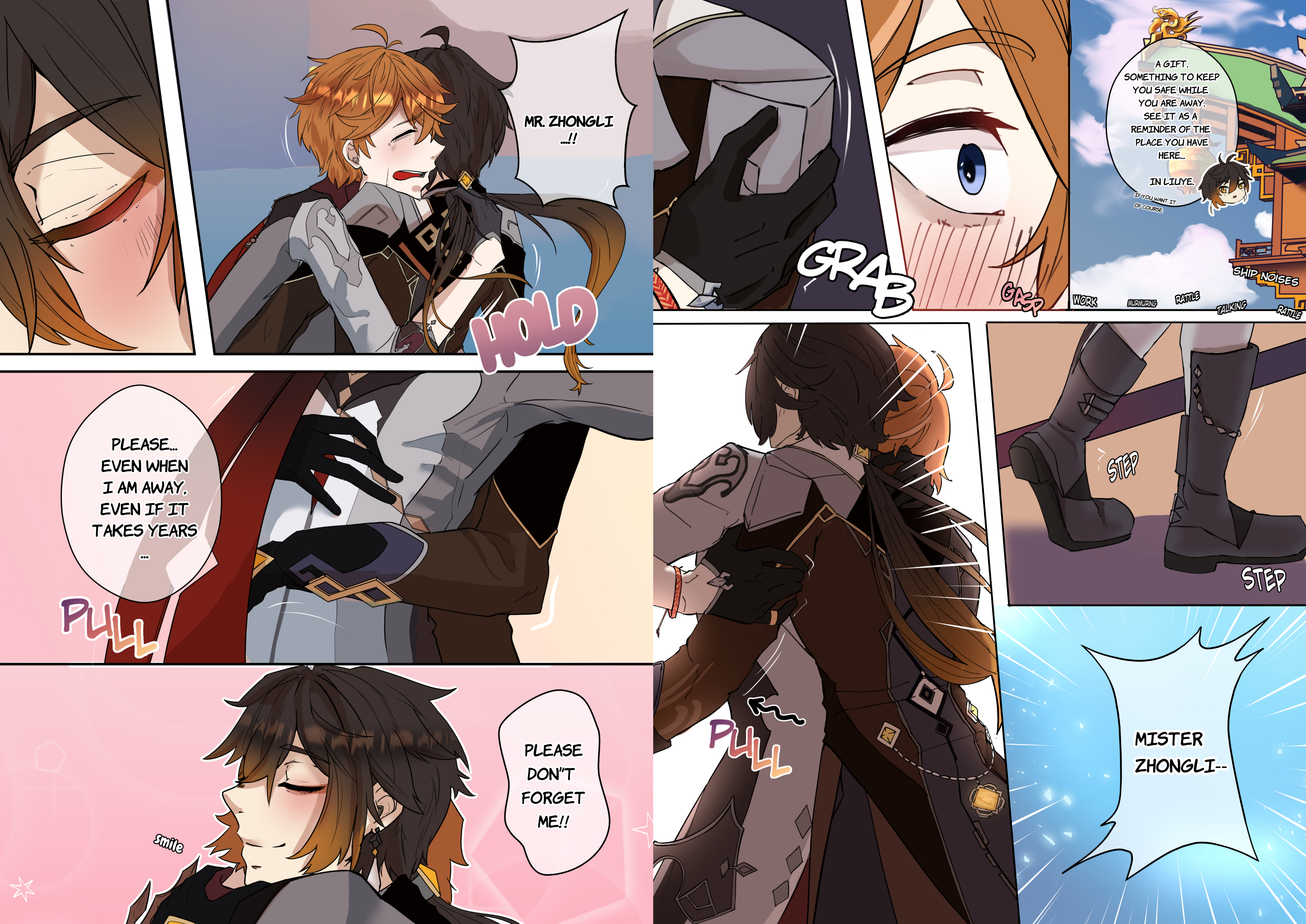
Within minutes, the village is ablaze.

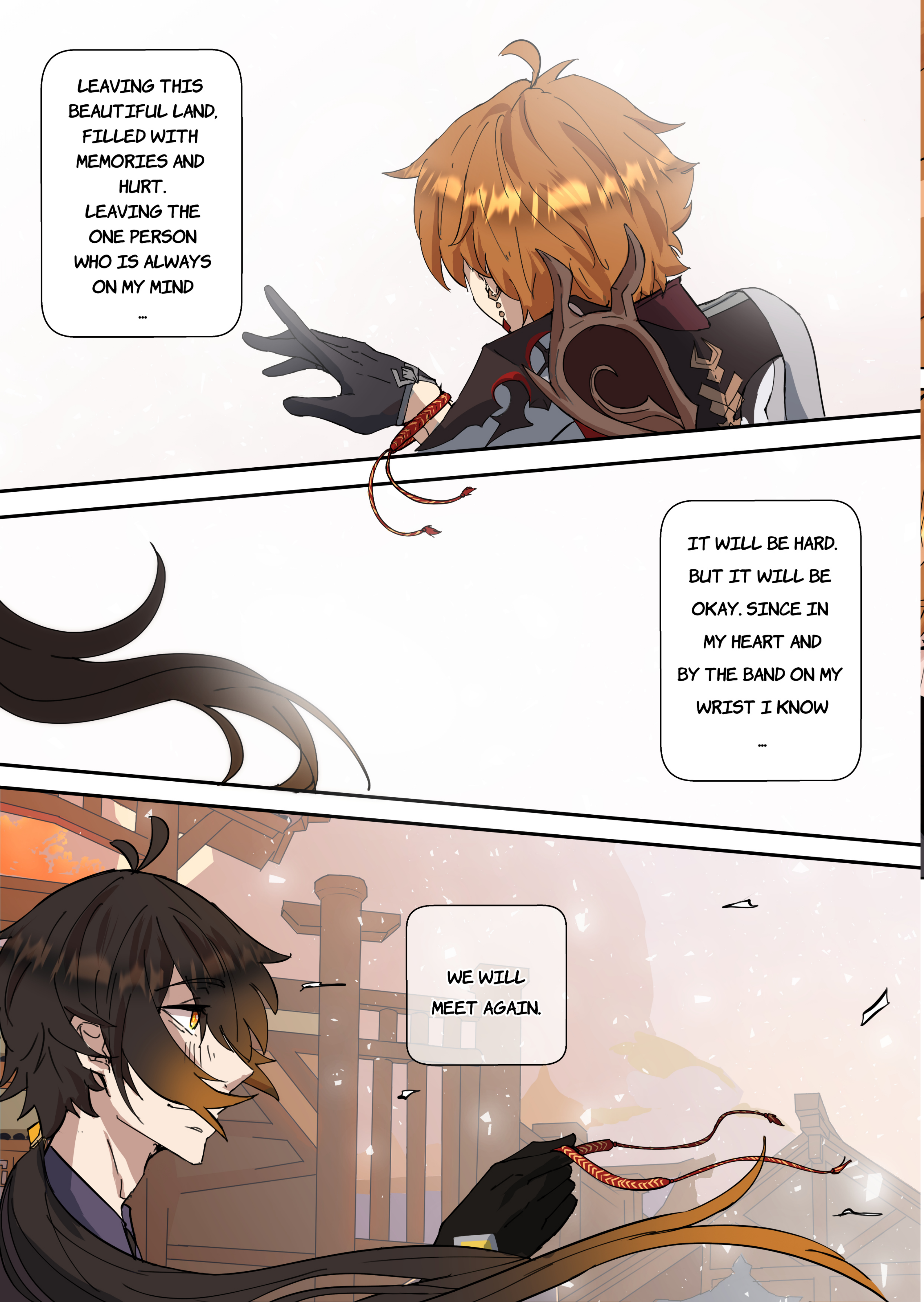
It can be seen on the horizon from all angles—homes and gardens burn well into the sunrise. Explosions are heard from afar, as are the crackling of wood and collapse of buildings. If anyone escapes, they escape to the east where Ajax will not hunt them.

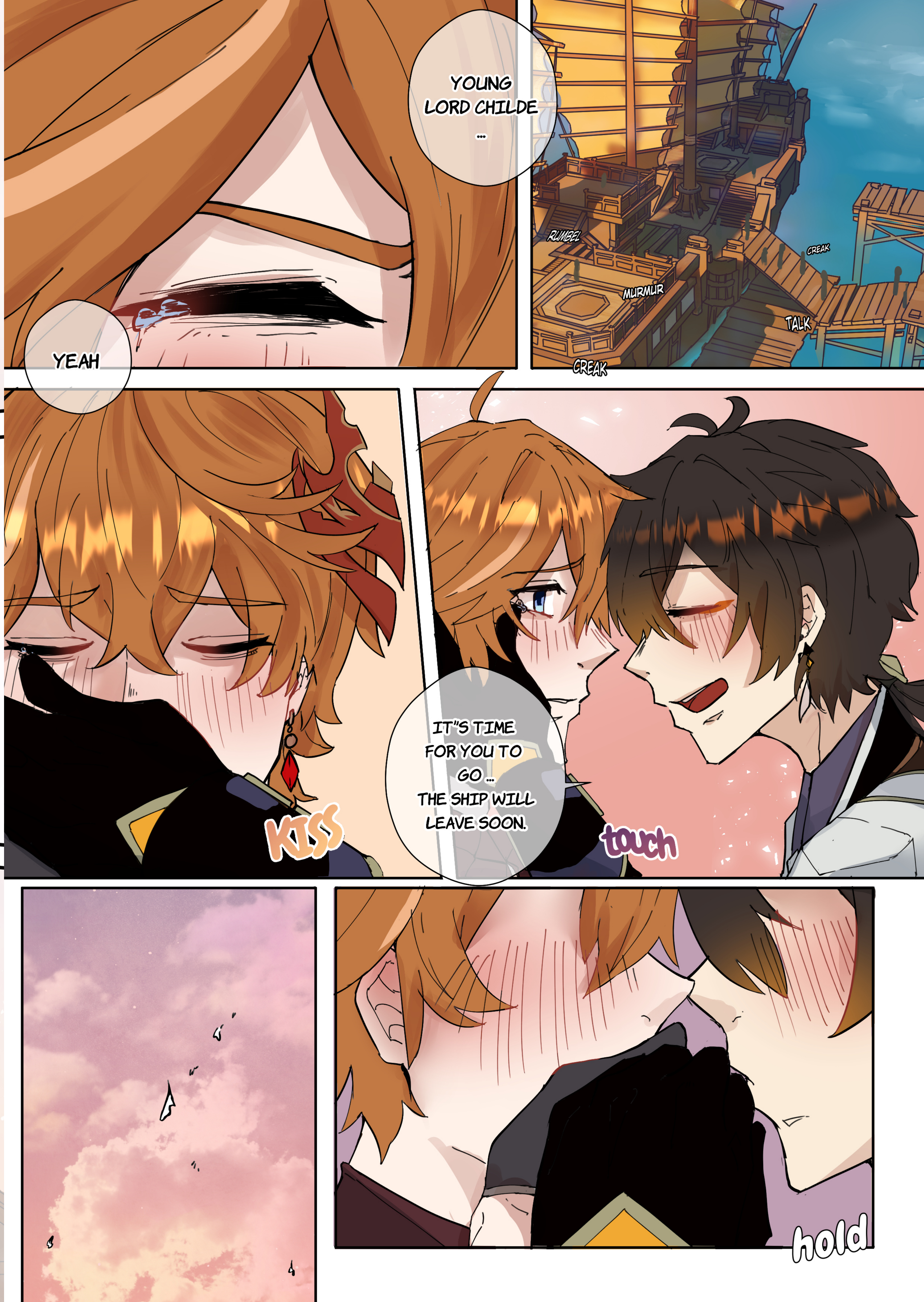
He wonders if Father saw something like this before himself becoming kindling.

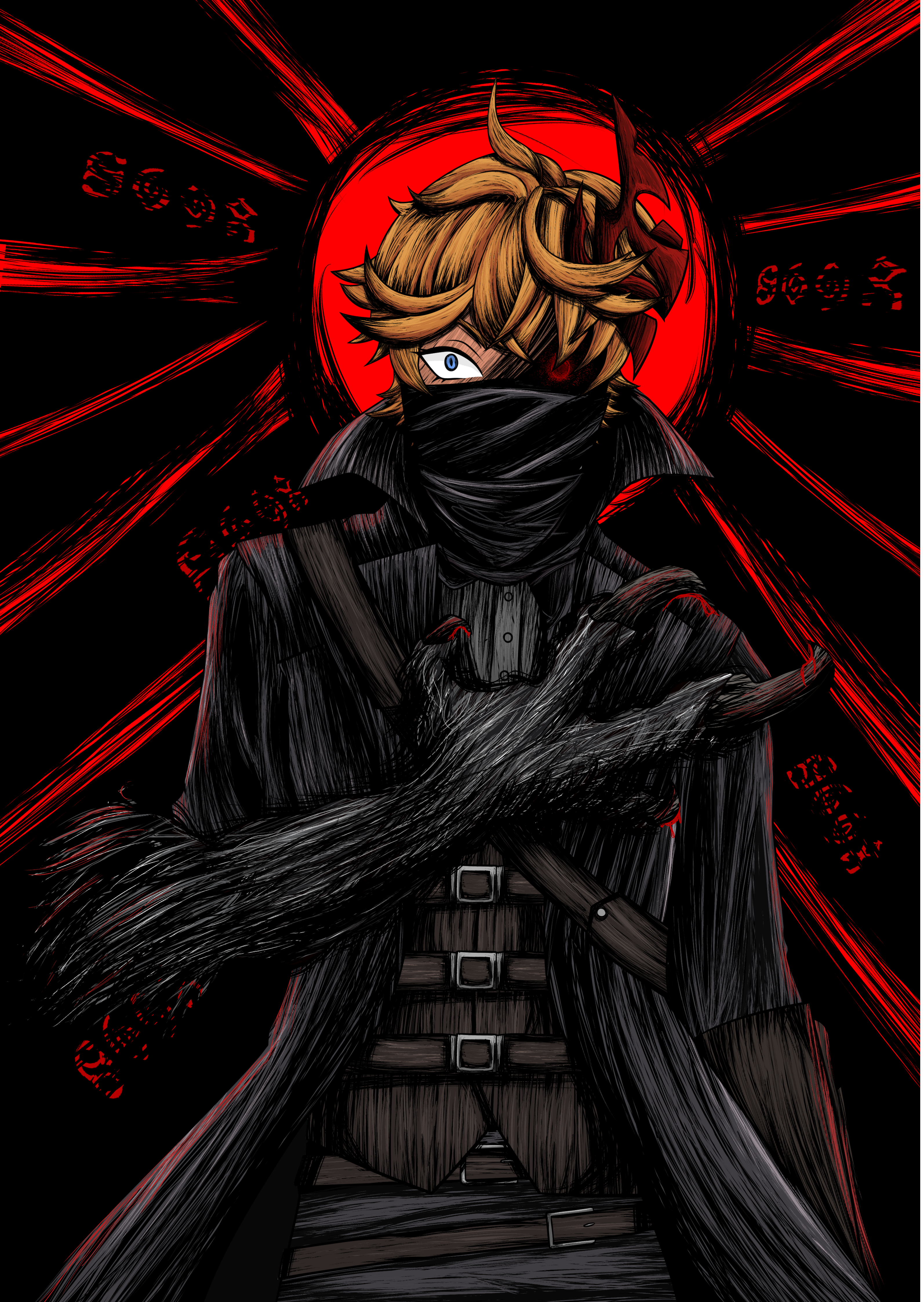

READ RIGHT TO LEFT
AFTER A MORE OR LESS SUCCESSFUL MISSION IN LIUYE, I RECEIVED AN ORDER FROM HER MAJESTY TO LEAVE FOR INAZUMA WITH THE NEXT POSSIBLE SHIP.
LEAVING LIYUE WAS HARD. BUT WHAT HURT THE MOST WAS VANNISHING FROM HIS LIFE.
AH
MISTER ZHONGLI~


GRAB!!
WAH!!
GIVE ME YOUR HAND, PLEASE.
WHAT; ARE YOU GOING TO PROPOSE~?
DON'T BE SILLY.
OH—
RATTLE
RATTLE
STEP
STEP
IN ANY CASE... I CAME, DESPITE YOUR MISSING NOTICE, TO GIVE YOU SOME-THING. FOR YOUR TRAVELS.
EHEHE
STEP
STEP
DID YOU WAIT FOR ME?
STEP
STEP
YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO --
happy
happy
YOUNG LORD CHILDE, I HEARD THAT YOU ARE LEAVING FOR INAZUMA TONIGHT, WITHOUT TELLING ME.


MR. ZHONGLI
...!!
HOLD
PLEASE...
EVEN WHEN
I AM AWAY,
EVEN IF IT
TAKES YEARS
...
PULL
smile
PLEASE
DON'T
FORGET
ME!!
GRAB
GASP
A GIFT.
SOMETHING TO KEEP
YOU SAFE WHILE
YOU ARE AWAY.
SEE IT AS A
REMINDER OF THE
PLACE YOU HAVE
HERE...
IN LIUYE.
IF YOU WANT IT
OF COURSE
WORK
MURMURING
RATTLE
TALKING
SHIP NOISES
RATTLE
PULL
STEP
STEP
MISTER
ZHONGLI--


LEAVING THIS BEAUTIFUL LAND, FILLED WITH MEMORIES AND HURT. LEAVING THE ONE PERSON WHO IS ALWAYS ON MY MIND
...
IT WILL BE HARD. BUT IT WILL BE OKAY. SINCE IN MY HEART AND BY THE BAND ON MY WRIST I KNOW
...
WE WILL MEET AGAIN.


YOUNG LORD CHILDE
...
RUMBEL
CREAK
MURMUR
TALK
CREAK
YEAH
KISS
IT"S TIME FOR YOU TO GO ... THE SHIP WILL LEAVE SOON.
touch
hold



The Deep and Dark Embittered

Ajax comes home one night to find a Fatui Harbinger in his family's kitchen.

It is comical. The Harbinger is the size of two men, barrel-chested, clad in armor and a helmet, his face hidden by a black void. Ma has forced him into a dining chair that he doesn't quite fit in, the wood creaking underneath his weight.

The Harbinger is polite. He holds the tea she makes him, cupped in the palm of his gauntlet. He sips at it, somehow drinking through that shimmery black shade, and when Ma offers a refill, he accepts it graciously.

“I am surprised,” she says to him, flitting about the kitchen. “I certainly didn't that any of our boys would be tested."

“We look for padawans everywhere,” he replies, “even in the furthest reaches."

Ma chuckles. “Yes, well, you've certainly found your way into the middle of nowhere. Nothing but ice and fish, out here." He gives him a too-kind smile. “And, apparently, potential Jedi."

“Ah. I must be honest—I met with the boy already. He is Force sensitive, but not quite what I'm looking for. Surely you understand."

Ma's face twists slightly. Ajax knows why. The Fatui pay handsomely for any child carted off for training. The word on the street is that it isn't a bad gig. Ajax has no interest—he'd rather be off ice fishing, but he knows that Ma was hopeful that one of his brothers might be the right fit. The winter is bitter this year, and the markets are barren. The entire family is sick of beans and potatoes.

"I've a whole brood of children," she says then, trying to lighten the mood. "Perhaps in the future."

"Perhaps," says the Harbinger. "There is certainly a good chance. Your boy is—" He cuts himself off as Ajax shuffles into the mudroom to kick off his boots.

Ma sighs, already at his heels to pick up after him. "Ajax, *really*." She sighs, long-suffering because this is a daily occurrence. "Apologies, Sir Harbinger," she continues. "I swear that he has manners. Perhaps just a little excited, hm?"

Not particularly. His brothers and other boys in the village might hand grand illusions of becoming a Jedi, but Ajax would rather stay home and fish on the ice with Pa. Ajax looks the Harbinger up and down, sniffs, and then toddles off once he's shed his jacket.

"Really," Ma mutters, picking that up too, folding it over her arm.

"That one," says the Harbinger. Ajax's back is to him but he feels the burn of his gaze. The air is heavy, Ajax can nearly taste it. A shudder runs down his back as he tries to think of something else.

Ma gives him a befuddled look. "Ajax?" She shakes her head. "She isn't like Pyotr—Pyotr knows things, but Ajax is just a boy. He's never…" She trails off, thumbing her chin as she thinks.

Ajax finally looks, meeting the dark gaze of the Harbinger. He cannot see his face but Ajax's skin squirms at the same. *Something off. There's something off—*

The Harbinger watches him for a long moment, then he places the teacup onto the kitchen table and stands, the floorboards creaking underneath his weight. Ajax wonders just what kind of being is lurking underneath that helmet. "I thank you for the tea," he says. Another glance in Ajax's direction. "I'll take my leave."

"I—Wait, Sir, let me at least help you to the door—"

Ajax stills as the Harbinger comes to a pause beside him. A heavy gauntlet falls against his shoulder. "Behave. She works hard, and all of it for you." He hasn't misbehaved, but the deep gravelly voice has Ajax standing straight nonetheless. Then, the Harbinger says, "Until the next."

"I doubt we'll meet again," replies Ajax with all the precociousness of a child.

The Harbinger chuckles, the sound strange and tinny, echoing behind the fathomless darkness of his mask. His hand lifts away and Ajax feels as though he can breathe again. When he leaves, the home feels light again, the Harbinger having taken the Force with him.

* * *

Years later, Ajax runs away and falls into a hole.

He curses his damned teenage years as he swims through the darkness. He curses being a man, because *Ma was right*—he has no sense for directions, especially wherever he is now. Upwards feels down, left feels right. Ajax feels both pulled thin and flattened wide, inside and outwards, and all of it *wrong*.

Ajax lands on his feet. The air is rank, smelling like death, the sort that's roadkill that's sat under the sun for too long until it reeks. His chest burns, he can't breathe, everything is *wrong, wrong, wrong*—

It is also right. He doesn't know why but it's on the tip of his tongue. He crawls through that darkness on hands and feet, then his knees, then he gains the strength to run on his feet.

He doesn't think about the creatures. Ajax snarls in the face of them, baring his teeth. They follow him forever as he wanders until one night, he's hungry enough to tear one to shreds and eat it.

It is foul. Ajax has eaten worse things, but it is *foul*—and the alternative is worse. Ajax tears into the bitter-black skin of the formless creature and tries not to think of where he might be.

He wanders for days, weeks, months—*years?*

Ma was right about this too. Men have no sense of time, least of all boys—only Ajax isn't a boy anymore, he's grown like a weed, long-limbed enough that he trips over his steps.

Ajax spends his moments the same: he swims through that darkness, he hunts down those faceless creatures, and he eats his fill before moving on. There is no end in sight. He does not sleep. He huddles into tight corners, arms around his knees, muttering soft words as he tries to keep sane.

He isn't though—*he isn't*. Madness creeps into his veins.

Skirk does not help. Ajax has no time for figments of his imagination, but even an imaginary friend is better than being alone. He carves a weapon of stone. He learns to slide through the shadows. That acrid, rotten taste of his fiends is now a comfort to him as he tears meat from the bone, swallowing it raw.

Voices in his ears, whispering words of violence, urging him to hunt. *The Force*, says Skirk, nudging him to dig deep into himself, to harness what lurks inside his breast.

Power swirls. Ajax changes, stretching long and thin, and a monster bursts through. Everything else scatters. Ajax learns that to survive in such a place, he must become one with it. He relishes the power that flows through his veins, keening with every kill with his claws. He thinks it is the Force, but it isn't as it was ever described to him—*but the power!*

He is a monster, a myth, he has become the nightmare. Everything else scatters. He is the denizen of the deep, a keeper of doom, with darkness at his whim. Ajax fights and fights and fights—

It has been so long since he last saw the sun that, at first he doesn't recognize the blinding light.

He shrieks under the brightness, the foulest of his legacies melting away. He is Ajax again, a bumbling thing, too young to be lost in a land of the dark.

When he climbs out it is still winter. The snow bites at his bare feet, and he hisses as he picks his way over it, ignoring the searing pain of the cold.

It is his older brother who finds him. He screams in relief, rushing to him, pulling him into a powerful bear hug. “Ajax!”

Ajax yanks away violently. He lashes out, teeth gnashing, ripping into the meat of Pyotr's arm.

His brother shrieks. Ajax mouth comes away vermillion. Pytor nurses his arm, eyes wide with fear and confusion. He tries and fails to speak, tongue thick in his mouth. “What—*how*—”

“I'm sorry.” Ajax doesn't know what came over him. *“I'm sorry, I'm sorry—”*

Pytor pulls him close again, curling Ajax's face into his chest. “It'll be alright,” he says. “Come Ajax, let's get you home. It'll be okay.”

It isn't okay.

Ajax comes back home to learn that he's only been gone a few days. He is wound tight and irrational. And the nightmares—Ajax never sleeps through the night, memories of the Void fresh in his mind.

He is violent. He snaps at people and delights in their fear. Ma watches him with shaking hands, too afraid to step within arm's reach of him. Pa doesn't know what to do with him except to sell him off to the Fatui as other troubled boys often are.

It is the Harbinger that comes to pick him up. Pa looks regretful as he takes the bag of coins. Teucer cries and Tonia seethes with rage. The air is loud with their emotion. Ajax wants to silence it and feels that darkness in his being creep forward.

A heavy hand on his shoulder stops it. “Boy,” says the Harbinger.

Ajax looks at him and sees the swirling darkness inside his mask. *Monster* his bones scream. *Just like me. Just like—*

“Do you want to be a Jedi?"

No, thinks Ajax. A Jedi isn't enough. He wants to be the best, he craves power, he wants to be a *god*.

“I want to be a Harbinger,” is what he says instead.

* * *

Ajax had grand illusions that Il Capitano might take on the title of his Master, but he soon learns that the Padawans within the Fatui ranks are barely trained before being thrown out to the dogs.

He learns a passing understanding of the Force. There is a focus on weapons. Ajax and the others are run through drill after drill until they vomit. *Never give in to the Dark Side.* Ajax repeats the mantra as does everyone else, but the words feel sour in his throat.

The darkness is good. He thrived in the darkness, he is the darkness, the darkness is him, he is a monster, a monster, a monster—

Ajax rarely sees Il Capitano, thrust into the hands of one Pulcinella instead, a short and squat Harbinger who looks like he can barely Force-Push a boulder.

All he does is watch—particularly Ajax. His gaze is smiling, the sickly sweet kind that never quite reaches his eyes. *Another monster.* Ajax wonders if all the Harbingers are as such and thinks, if so, then he'll fit right in.

* * *

Special interest is taken in Ajax and he is assigned a babysitter.

Ekaterina is another Jedi, older and wiser, no-nonsense in her nature. They get on like oil and water. Ajax ignores her for the most part, throwing himself into his studies. He pours over books, over forms, eating up any and everything that he can find in his bid to gain power.

He feels the good of the Force like he's taught, cradling the power in his hand. But there's something else there, something else lurking just under the surface.

Most boys have dreams, but Ajax has nightmares. *The monster within. It wants out. That's the Force too, right?* It must be good, because he's good, that's the entire point of working himself to the bone.

Ekaterina's job is to watch and document what she sees, and make sure that he behaves. *Which he does.* Ajax is a pinnacle of military steadfastness. First to rise in the morning and last to turn in after a night of study. His sheets are crisp with square corners. His weapons are polished to a perfect sheen.

There is nothing ill to report—except for the nightmares.

Ajax fiddles with the Force during the day and drowns in the darkness at night. He dreams of the Void, of Skirk, of the Foul Legacy. He tastes the acrid taste of rotting flesh on his tongue, and the days and weeks of starvation when he couldn't stomach it anymore.

He wakes with a shout and cold sweat.

Ekaterina is kind enough to leave this out of her report. She is a Jedi; she is not supposed to have attachments but she's kind and caring, and sits by Ajax's bed when he's in the throes of his dreams. Over the years they grow close like family, Ekaterina's hand gentle as she prods his heated brow with a cold towel.

"Ajax," she calls him. Not *Sir*, or *Padawan*, or the worst them all—*recruit*. She brushes back his bangs and sighs as he drowns in the fear he is not supposed to give in.

Fear leads to hate, hate leads to anger, anger leads to suffering—

In the mornings, they pretend everything is normal. Ajax ignores the darkness that seeps into his bones, that tinges his edges, that pulls him deeper and deeper every day that passes. He still wishes to be a god, but it's tempered with his teachings.

Ajax, now, is a skilled soldier, carefully trained in his duty to protect.

He thinks of his family, of Moropesok, of everyone else who is at risk of danger. The mantra is clear: *There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony.*

In the grand scheme of things, he is barely trained, given only the basics for strict curation of his power.

But Ajax doesn't realize this, he only thinks of what has been drilled into his head, over and over.

There is no death, there is the Force.

* * *

When Ajax is crowned the youngest Harbinger, it is not a special affair. It happens in a tiny room. He says a short oath and signs a length of parchment.

It is the first time he sees the Tsaritsa in person. She is as beautiful as she is cruel, ice-blue eyes narrowly slit as she watches him sign his loyalty away. She cups his chin in a frozen grip. "A wonderful creature you are," she says, as if he isn't human. "What good you'll do for the might of Snezhnaya."

He should be worried about her words. The Ajax of young would remember the stories he used to read of Jedis, but the Ajax of now is too drunk on his title to think much of it.

"From henceforth, you are Tartaglia," she murmurs, tracing her thumb over the arch of his cheek.

"Denizen of the Deep," he finishes.

Ajax is gone, he thinks, as that darkness curls in his chest. Surely this is the Force at play, surely this is the power that is supposed to bleed through his veins. *Monsters, every one of them, every single Harbinger in that room is just not quite right.*

"Death, yet the Force," says Ajax quietly.

When the Tsaritsa grins, it is not with the grace of a Jedi, it is with the malice often found in the Sith. "Now then, I have a job for you, my youngest."

Ajax sheds his name and becomes Tartaglia, and the monster within him roars.

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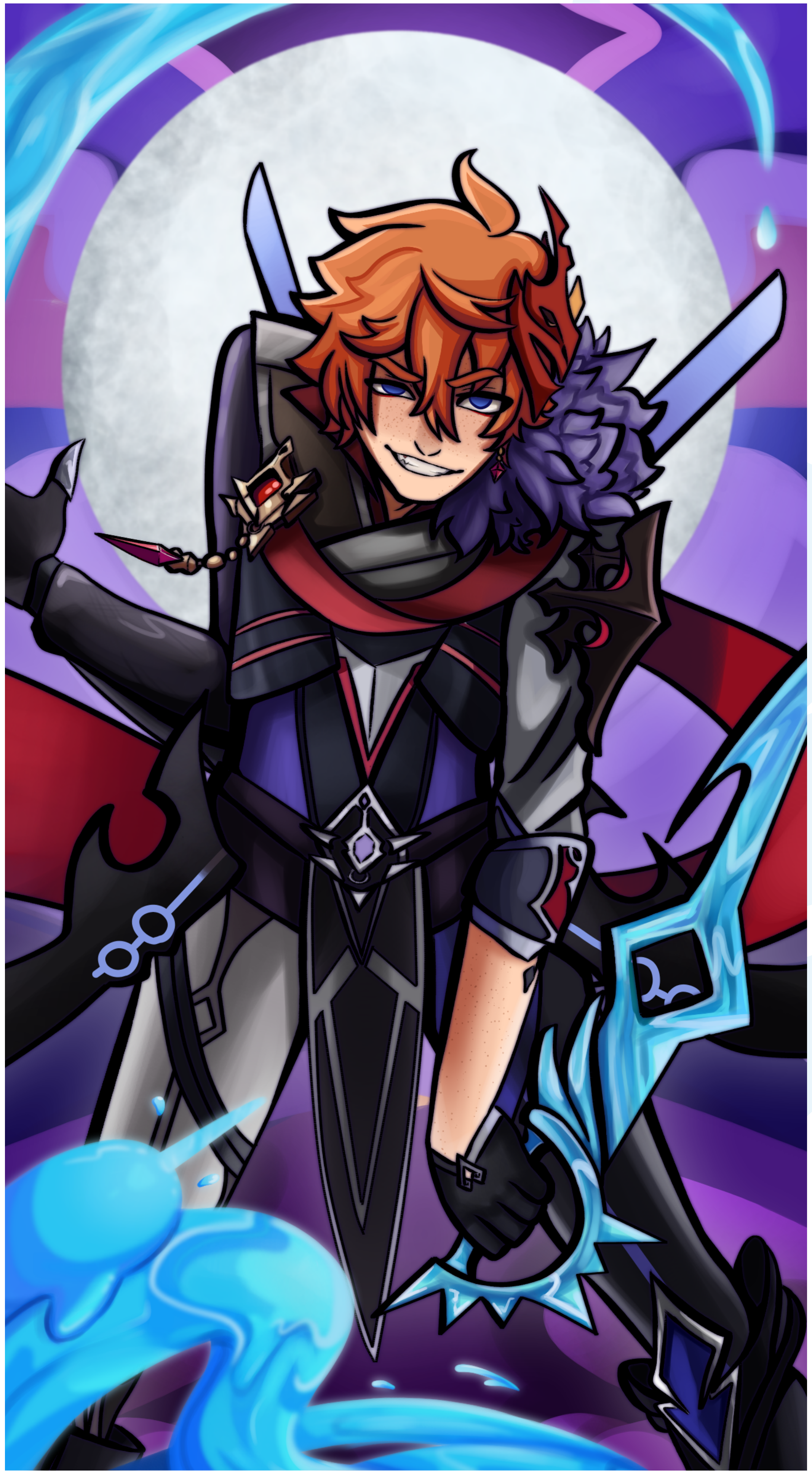

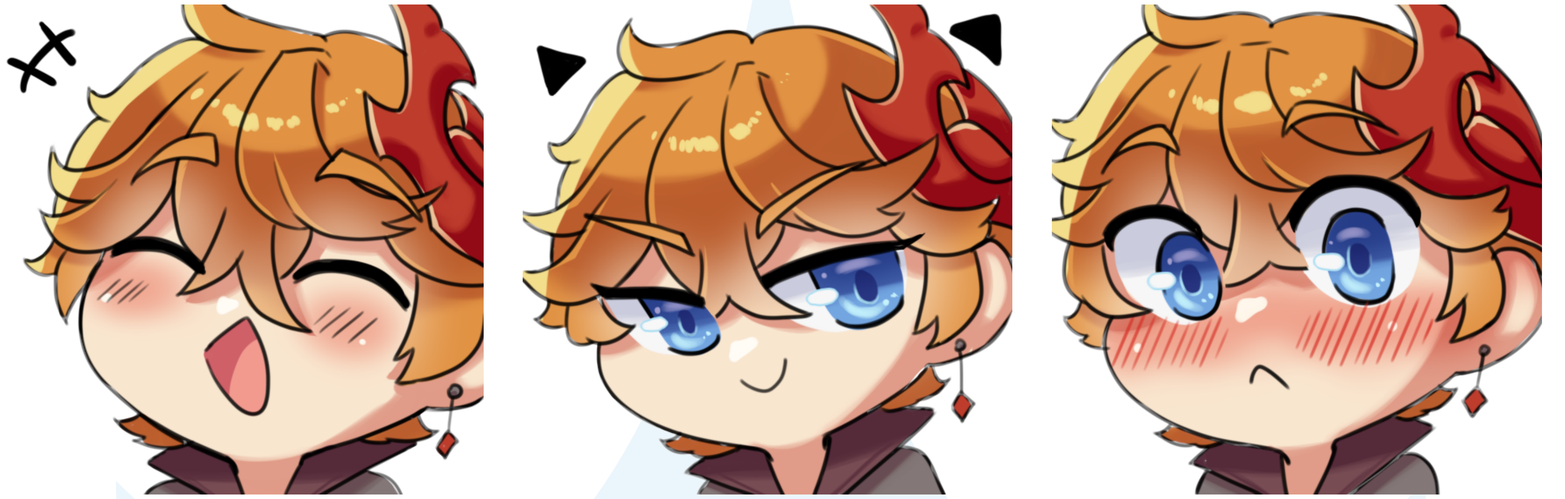

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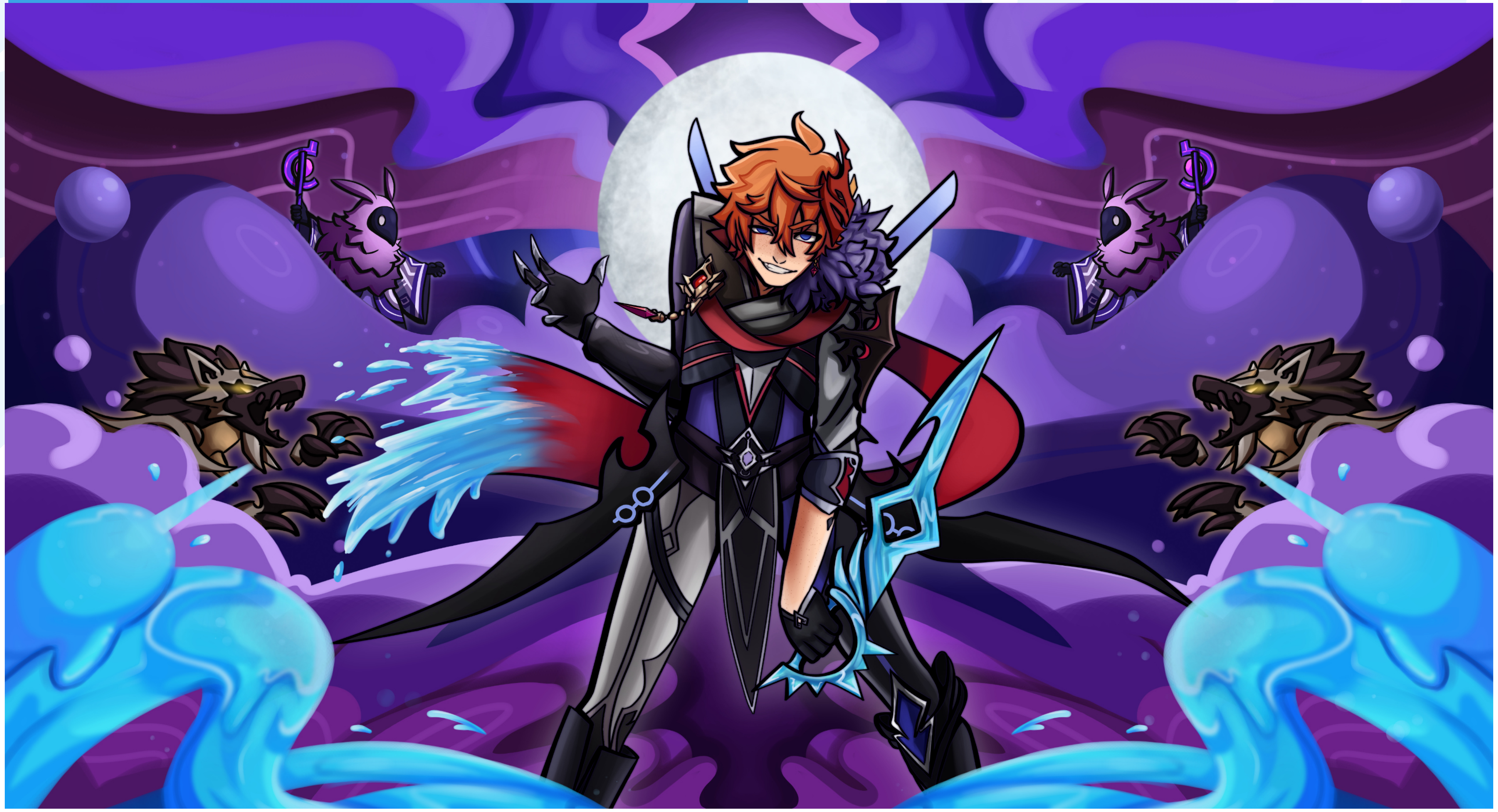

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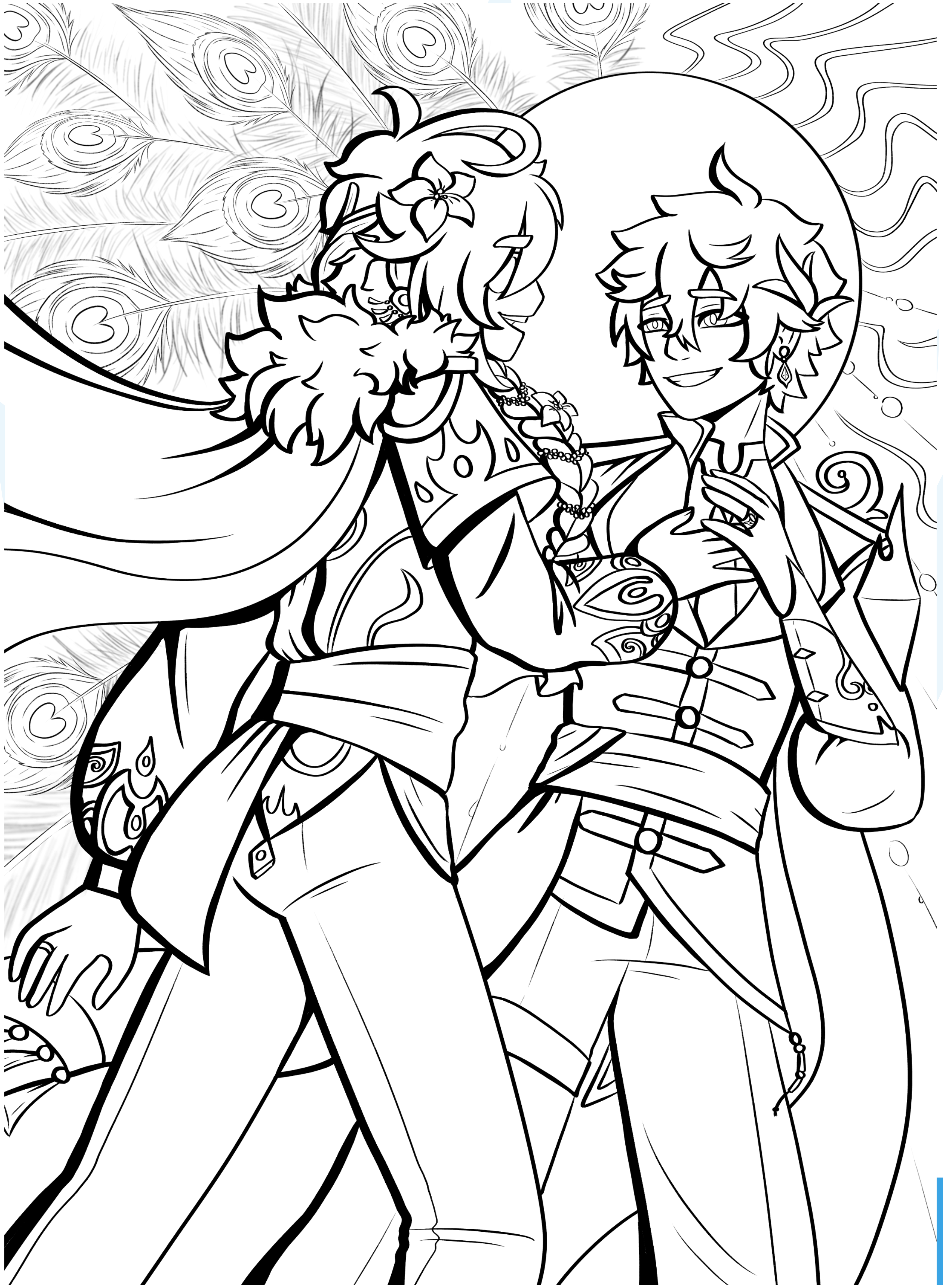

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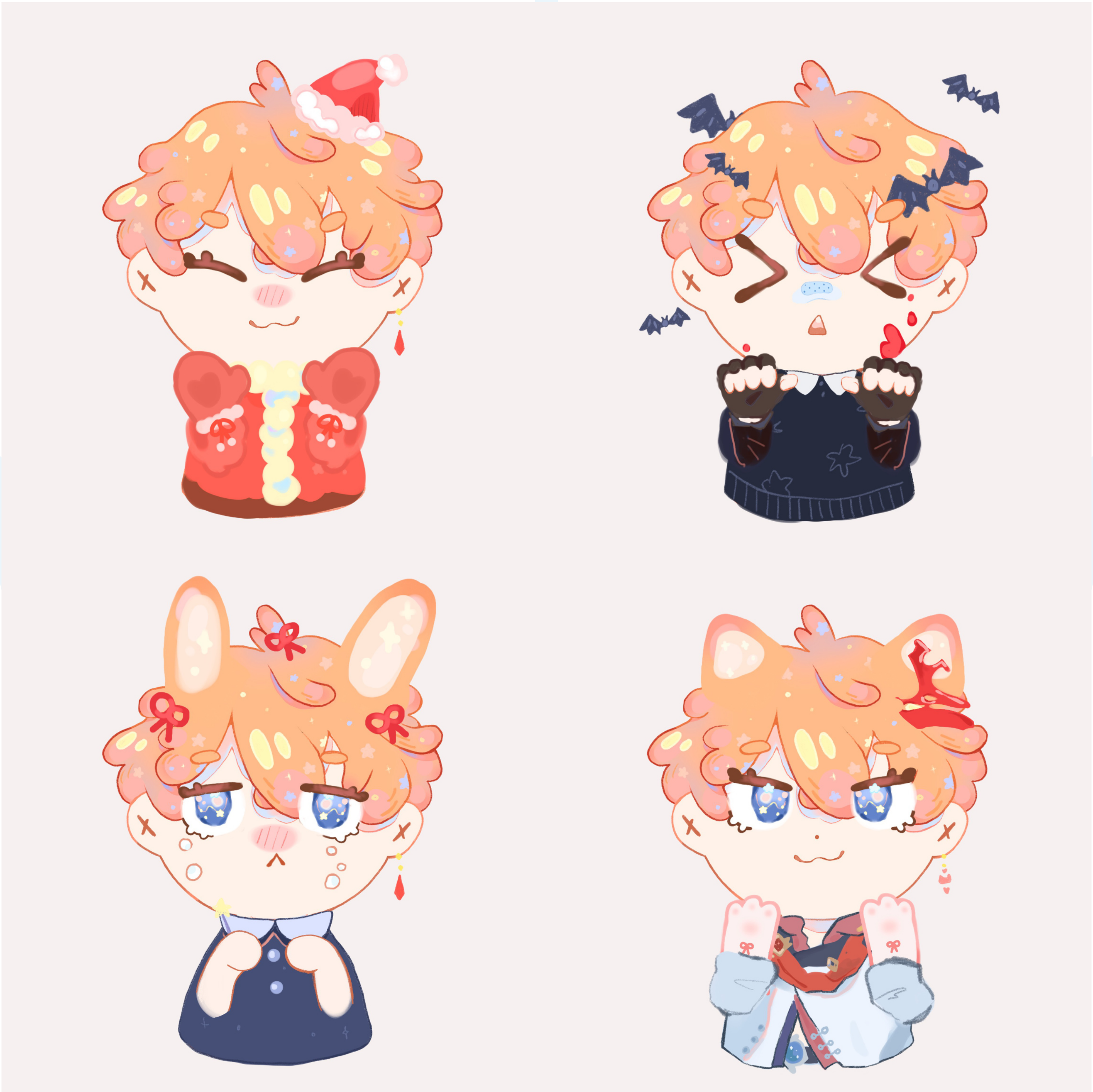

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